Journal of
School
Psychology

Supportive school climate and student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence

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Abstract

This study investigated the relations between student perceptions of support and student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence in a sample of 7318 ninth-grade students from 291 high schools who participated in the Virginia High School Safety Study. Hierarchical linear modeling indicated that students who perceived their teachers and other school staff to be supportive were more likely to endorse positive attitudes toward seeking help for bullying and threats of violence. In schools with more perceived support, there was less of a discrepancy in help-seeking attitudes between girls and boys. Findings suggest that efforts by school staff to provide a supportive climate are a potentially valuable strategy for engaging students in the prevention of bullying and threats of violence.
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Adolescents are often reluctant to seek help for bullying or threats of violence (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). Studies document that as few as 25–30% of students who have been bullied report the incident to an authority figure and that only 11% of students are willing to seek help at school for personal problems (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Smith & Shu, 2000). Unnever and Cornell (2004) reported that students were especially reluctant to seek help when they regarded school staff as unconcerned with or tolerant of

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bullying. Oliver and Candappa (2007) found that, as students grow older, they become increasingly reluctant to seek help for bullying from teachers or other adults. Multiple studies have called for more research on conditions that would promote help seeking in schools (Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Williams & Cornell, 2006). Help seeking in schools is critical to the success of violence prevention programs because school staff cannot offer services or interventions if they are unaware that a student is being victimized (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd & Ladd, 2001; Smith, Talamelli, & Cowie, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers often do not witness bullying or recognize it when they see it (Craig et al., 2000; Olweus, 1993). Accordingly, most bullying prevention programs stress the need for students to come forward when they experience bullying or observe bullying of their peers (Hazler & Carney, 2006; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Rigby, 1996).

Help seeking is a critical issue for ninth-grade students. Ninth grade is a year in which students are especially vulnerable to conflict, aggressive and disruptive behavior, and school disengagement (Donegan, 2008). In Virginia, ninth-grade students are responsible for 45% of all discipline infractions among students in grades 9–12 (Virginia Department of Education, 2005). Estell et al. (2007) found that aggressive behavior in ninth grade was related to poor grades and substance abuse. Academic achievement and social adjustment in ninth grade is also highly correlated with drop-out rates (Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2008; Ripple & Luthar, 2000). Roderick and Camburn (1996) found that 60% of students who dropped out of Chicago high schools had failed ninth grade. Among those students who spent more than 1 year as ninth graders, only 20% completed high school. In Neild et al.'s study of 2933 students in Philadelphia public schools, ninth-grade academic performance predicted high school drop-out, even after controlling for family income, parental education, and eighth-grade academic performance.

Researchers conventionally define bullying as a social interaction in which an individual or group subjects someone to repeated humiliation or intimidation that can include verbal abuse, physical violence, or social rejection (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Esbensen & Carson, 2009; Olweus, 1993). The aggressor must be stronger or in some way more powerful than the victim; conflict between equals is not considered bullying. A study using a nationally representative sample of 7182 students in grades 6–10 found a high prevalence of victimization at least once in the past two months, with approximately 13% of students reporting physical bullying, 37% verbal bullying, and 41% relational or social bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), although it should be noted that researchers caution that prevalence rates are highly influenced by definitional criteria (Esbensen & Carson, 2009). Disciplinary problems associated with bullying are a daily or at least weekly problem in 25% of U.S. public schools, according to the School Survey on Crime and Safety (Neiman, DeVoe, & Chandler, 2009).

Studies show that victims of bullying suffer from a range of serious consequences, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and increased risk for suicide (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Esbensen & Carson, 2009; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2003). Longitudinal studies have found that victimization is associated with poorer social and emotional adjustment (Esbensen & Carson, 2009), physical health problems (Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006), and increased incidence of anxiety disorders in young adulthood (Sourander et al., 2007).

Closely related to the experience of bullying is the experience of being threatened with violence. Bullies often make threats, and victims of bullying sometimes threaten physical

retaliation as a form of self defense. Singer and Flannery (2000) found that students frequently make and receive threats of violence and that threats are a robust predictor of hitting, fighting, and weapon use. According to 2005 national results from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 8% of students in grades 9–12 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months (Dinkes, Cataldi, Lin-Kelly, & Snyder, 2007). During the 2007–08 school year, nearly half (48%) of public schools reported a student threat of physical violence and 9% reported a student threat involving a weapon (Neiman et al., 2009).

In the most extreme cases, bullying and threats have been linked to school shootings. The U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education study of targeted school-based attacks by students found that 71% of attackers felt bullied, threatened, or attacked by others prior to the incident (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) study of school shootings reported that student attackers typically communicated their violent intentions to peers in the form of threatening statements (O'Toole, 2000). The FBI study also identified cases in which school shootings were prevented because students reported that a classmate or peer had expressed threats of violence that were investigated and found to be serious. Their report concluded that threat reporting was a critical element of successful violence prevention. The overwhelming majority of U.S. public schools now provide some form of curriculum, instruction, or training for students on violence prevention. Over half (52%) have programs to encourage direct student involvement in resolving peer conflicts and related problems, and more than 25% have a student hotline or tipline for reporting problems (Neiman et al., 2009).

1. School climate and help seeking

School climate is a complex construct used to describe the characteristic qualities of interactions among adults and students at school (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002). School climate is often measured using student perceptions of how students get along with one another and are treated by school staff (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Hoy et al., 2002; Rosenblatt & Furlong, 1997). One of the most frequently used markers of school climate is student perceptions of whether teachers (and other school staff) care about students and treat them fairly (Hoy et al., 2002). Based on this literature, the present study measured supportive school climate using ninth-grade student perceptions that teachers care about them, believe in them, and treat them fairly and respectfully. Our measure of supportive climate does not completely encompass the broader domain of school climate, but it represents an important and frequently studied aspect of school climate.

Student perceptions of supportive school climate have been linked to student adjustment, commitment to learning, and academic achievement (Brand et al., 2003; Phillips, 1997), as well as school safety and teacher victimization (Astor, Benbenishty, Zeira, & Vinokur, 2002; Gottfredson et al., 2005). However, children become less willing to seek help as they move into adolescence (Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). The influence of support in the environment may not be as strong on older students, whose developmental attitudes and striving for independence make them less amenable to help seeking. However, adolescent perceptions of supportive school climate, as measured by perceptions of support from teachers, have been linked to attitudes about help seeking (Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998; Lisi, 2004; Wilson & Deanne, 2001).

Focus groups conducted with high school students consistently reveal that accessibility, availability, and perceived willingness to help are factors in a student's decision to approach teachers (Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998; Wilson & Deanne, 2001). Lisi (2004) surveyed 27,604 secondary students in grades 6 through 8. Supportive climate was measured using student perceptions that their teachers worked in their best interest, provided assistance and support, and had a personal connection with students. Students who reported these perceptions were more likely to report having at least one adult in the school whom they could approach regarding academic, personal, or family problems.

Williams and Cornell (2006) used the Willingness to Seek Help scale to measure student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence in a sample of 542 middle-school students. The scale consisted of five items asking students whether they would seek help from a teacher or school staff member under various circumstances. Students expressed greater willingness to seek help for higher risk situations. For example, only about 46% of students expressed willingness to seek help from a teacher for bullying, but most students said they would seek help if another student talked about killing someone (77%) or brought a gun to school (90%). Williams and Cornell also found that student willingness to seek help declined during middle-school (grades 6 to 8) and was lower among boys. Students in this study who perceived their school climate to be tolerant of bullying were less willing to seek help.

Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konold (2009) studied a slightly longer, 8-item version of the Willingness to Seek Help scale (Williams & Cornell, 2006). This scale was administered to 7318 ninth-grade students as part of the Virginia High School Safety Study (VHSSS), which is the source of the sample used in the present study. A series of multiple regression analyses revealed that schools characterized by higher willingness to seek help experienced safer school conditions, including lower suspension and expulsion rates and, according to teacher reports, less gang-related violence, lower rates of bullying and teasing, and more help seeking behaviors by students. These findings show a consistent relation between student willingness to seek help and school safety, and they support the effort in the present study to identify characteristics of school climate that facilitate student willingness to seek help.

The present study examined the relation between supportive school climate, as measured by student perceptions of teacher and staff supportiveness, and student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence. Whereas previous studies have examined how student perceptions of support from teachers relate to academic help seeking, this study measured perceived support in order to examine its relation to help seeking for bullying and threats of violence. Additionally, this study used a sample of ninth-grade students in order to investigate the effect of supportive climate at a time when students are developmentally less inclined to seek help from adults.

1.1. Demographic risk factors and help seeking

1.1.1. Gender differences

One of the most robust findings in the help seeking literature is that girls are more likely to seek help than boys for all types of problems (Balding, 1997; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Steinfeld, Steinfeld, & Speight, 2009). Gender differences are also evident in studies on

help seeking for bullying and threats of violence. Although boys are more often the victims of bullying, they seek help for bullying less frequently than girls seek help (Rigby, 1996). In a study of middle-school victims of bullying, Unnever and Cornell (2004) found that the predicted odds of a boy telling someone that he was being bullied was two-thirds that of the predicted odds of a girl. Hunter, Boyle, and Warden (2004) surveyed 830 students ages 9–14 and found that only 64% of boys told someone, including peers, when they were bullied, as opposed to 86% of girls.

Research investigating the gender difference in help seeking suggests that boys are more likely to associate help seeking with personal weakness (Eiser, Havermans, & Eiser, 1995; Steinfeld et al., 2009). Boys also report not seeking help because they believe it is not socially acceptable for them to do so (Nadler, 1998; Steinfeld et al., 2009; Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, & Blumberg, 2003). Although gender differences in behavior likely stem from ubiquitous cultural factors, rather than the school environment specifically, schools that clearly and consistently encourage help seeking as an appropriate behavior may be able to mitigate the influence of shame and gender stereotypes on boys' willingness to seek help.

1.1.2. Racial differences

Members of minority racial groups are less likely to seek help for a variety of problems (Sen, 2004; Windle, Miller-Tutzauer, & Barnes, 1991). Racial differences in help seeking are often attributed to mistrust of White authority figures (Nickerson, Helms, & Terrell, 1994). This mistrust has been linked to minority students' reluctance to seek mental health services (Nickerson et al., 1994) and to minority students' belief that they cannot turn to adults at school (Marsh & Cornell, 2001). African American students tend to receive disproportionate rates of disciplinary sanctions such as school suspension, even if their rates of misbehavior are not elevated, and this experience can build a sense of mistrust and disengagement from school (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Findings regarding racial differences in help seeking specifically for bullying and threats of violence are mixed and suggest a complex relationship between minority groups and school authorities. Williams and Cornell (2006) found no difference in the help-seeking attitudes of minority and non-minority middle-school students for bullying and threats of violence. Marsh and Cornell (2001) found that minority students were less likely to regard the adults at their school as supportive sources of help for a problem, and that this difference was associated with increased rates of high risk behavior such as fighting and weapon-carrying at school. After controlling for student perceptions of support, racial differences in high risk behaviors were reduced or eliminated. It is possible that minority students who perceive their teachers as supportive and trustworthy may be more willing to seek help at school for bullying and threats of violence. Gregory and Ripski (2008) found that student trust in teachers mediated the relations between disruptive behavior and use of relational discipline among African American students. African American students' lack of disruptive behavior with teachers who emphasized building student relationships may have been due to their higher trust in their teachers.

1.2. Present study

The present study examined the relations between student perceptions of support from teachers and student help-seeking attitudes for bullying and threats of violence. It was

hypothesized that (a) perceived support would be associated with positive attitudes toward help seeking and (b) perceived support would reduce gender and race differences in help-seeking attitudes. Although previous studies have examined the relations between student perceptions of support and help seeking at the individual student level, this study examined both individual and school-level effects. In other words, in addition to individual student perceptions of support in schools and willingness to seek help, this study also measured supportive climate as a school-level variable in order to determine whether highly supportive schools also have students who are more willing to seek help for bullying and threats of violence. Findings that between-school differences in perceptions of support are associated with school-level differences in student help seeking would have important ramifications for school policy and practices because it would indicate the desirability of school-wide interventions. This study was conducted as part of the Virginia High School Safety Study (VHSSS), a statewide investigation of safety conditions in Virginia public high schools (Cornell & Gregory, 2008).The VHSSS included an online school climate survey administered to randomly selected samples of ninth-grade students and teachers in each school. Students at this grade level were surveyed because the first year of high school is considered a pivotal year for student adjustment and achievement (Donegan, 2008) and because ninth-grade students in Virginia have an especially high rate of discipline violations (Virginia Department of Education, 2007).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Schools

In spring 2007, all 314 eligible public high schools in Virginia were invited to participate in the VHSSS as an augmentation of the state's annual school safety audit process conducted by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services (Cornell & Gregory, 2008). Schools were eligible for participation if they included grades 9–12, offered a high school diploma, and served students primarily under age 18. Educational programs were not eligible if they were on the grounds of a juvenile detention facility, students attended for less than half the school day, or the majority of the student population had a handicapping condition that would prevent them from taking the survey. A total of 291 schools (93% of eligible schools) participated in the study by administering an online school climate survey to a sample of their ninth-grade students, and the analyses described in subsequent sections were based on data from these 291 schools. This high participation rate was achieved with the cooperation of the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, who endorsed the study and encouraged participation.

Data on school demographics were obtained from Virginia Department of Education records. School enrollments ranged from 33 to 2881 with an average enrollment of 1207 students. The proportion of students receiving a free or reduced price meal (FRPM) ranged from 1% to 83% across schools ($M=30\%$, $SD=16\%$). The proportion of racial/ethnic minority students varied widely across schools, ranging from 0% to 99% ($M=34\%$, $SD=26\%$). Similarly, the proportion of African American students also ranged from 0 to 99% ($M=25\%$, $SD=24\%$).

2.1.2. Students

A total of 7363 students participated in the survey. However, 45 of them had little or no usable survey data (~0.6%). As a result, the usable sample of 7318 was used for analyses reported in this study. Of these 7318 students, 49% were girls and 51% were boys. Based on student self-report, the study sample was 63% Caucasian, 22% African American, 5% Hispanic, 3% Asian American, 5% Other, and less than 1% American Indian. The ninth-grade population reported by the Virginia Department of Education (2007) was 56% Caucasian, 30% African American, 8% Hispanic, 4% Asian American, and around 2% American Indian, Hawaiian, and Unspecified. The state had no "Other" category. Using the comparable racial categories, this study sample had slightly more Caucasian students and fewer African American, Hispanic, and Asian American students than the state's ninth-grade population.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Willingness to seek help

This 8-item scale measured student willingness to seek help from school staff members for bullying and threats of violence. Cornell and Sheras (2003) developed this scale for the School Climate Bullying Survey. The scale requires students to rate on a four-point scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements, such as, "If another student was bullying me, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school" and "If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school." Bullying was defined in the survey as "the use of one's strength or status to injure, threaten, or humiliate another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not* bullying when two students of about the same strength argue or fight."

Williams and Cornell (2006) used an earlier version of the Willingness to Seek Help scale to demonstrate that student attitudes toward seeking help differed across gender, age, and other aspects of school climate. Bandyopadhyay et al. (2009) used data from a sample of 2111 middle-school students who completed the current version of the scale to conduct exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. They demonstrated that the Willingness to Seek Help scale could be distinguished from other school climate factors (e.g., Prevalence of Teasing as well as Bullying and Aggressive Attitudes) and found that multi-group confirmatory factors analyses indicated metric invariance across gender and racial groups (i.e., Caucasian versus minority). The standardized alpha coefficient for this scale was .78 in the present study. Item ratings were averaged to produce a Willingness to Seek Help scale score for each student. The scale scores for all students in the same school were then aggregated (averaged) into an overall Willingness to Seek Help score for each school.

2.2.2. Supportive school climate

This 8-item scale measured the extent to which students perceive that adults at school care about students, respect them, and want them to do well. Austin and Duerr (2005) developed this scale in order to assess student perceptions in the California public schools. Students rate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements about whether or not adults in their school "really care about all students," "acknowledge and pay attention to students," "want all students to do their best," "listen to what students

have to say," "believe that every student can be a success," "treat all students fairly," "support and treat students with respect," and "feel a responsibility to improve the school."

A study of California secondary schools used a modified version of this scale and found that achievement test scores increased more in schools in which students reported more supportive relationships with their teachers and other adults at school (WestEd, 2009). The standardized alpha coefficient for the scale in this sample was .92. As with the Willingness to Seek Help scale, item ratings were averaged to produce a scale score for each student, and then all scale scores for students in the same school were aggregated into an overall Supportive School Climate score.

2.2.3. School demographics

There is widespread agreement that smaller schools foster closer and more personal relationships between students and teachers, resulting in a more positive, supportive school climate (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009). Therefore, school enrollment size, as reported in state Department of Education records, was statistically controlled in this study. The racial/ethnic composition of each school also was obtained from state records. Both percentage of minority students and percentage of African American students were investigated as possible controls. These variables were highly correlated ($r = .88$, $p < .05$). Because African American students were the only racial group whose help-seeking attitudes differed significantly from other students, it was considered most important to control for the proportion of African American students in each school, as opposed to the proportion of total minority students. Finally, school records of the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals were used as a proxy measure to account for the extent of poverty in each school.

2.3. Procedure

Each school principal received an electronic memo from the state superintendent regarding this study, followed by a postal mailing from the researchers containing written and video instructions on DVD. Principals received a follow-up phone call and email from a research assistant to answer any questions they had about the study and to encourage participation. The instructions asked principals to obtain a sample of 25 ninth-grade students using a set of random numbers generated for each school based on class size. Principals were asked to send a standard letter to parents explaining that their son or daughter had been chosen to complete an anonymous online survey as part of the state's school safety audit program and advising them to contact the school if they did not wish their child to participate. Students who were unwilling or unavailable to complete the survey were replaced with the next available student on the random number generated list. More than 96% of the participating schools submitted 20 to 30 surveys with an average of 25 surveys per school.

Principals completed an online report on the sampling procedure that asked them to identify the reasons why students did not participate. Approximately 27% of the students initially identified by the sampling procedure did not participate in the study and were replaced with the next available student on the roll. The reasons for nonparticipation included the following: the student declined to participate (16% of those who did not participate), the parent declined

(6%), the student was absent due to illness (32%), student suspended from school (5%); the student moved or transferred (7%); a student language barrier (3%) or some other reason (ranging from a severe disability to attending a field trip; 31%).

Students completed the surveys anonymously online at computers in classrooms under teacher supervision during the school day. At the outset of the survey, students read a standard set of directions and watched a short video explaining the purpose of the study. Students were told in the instructional video that their participation was voluntary and that they could stop the survey at any time. The scales used in this study were embedded in a 137-item school climate survey with the Willingness to Seek Help scale placed prior to the Supportive School Climate scale (Cornell & Gregory, 2008). Neither the teachers supervising survey completion, nor the students who completed surveys, were compensated for their participation.

2.4. Analysis plan

We were primarily interested in understanding whether a more supportive school climate would be associated with more positive student help seeking attitudes and whether a supportive school climate would moderate gender and racial/ethnic group differences in student help-seeking attitudes. The major analysis approach was multi-level modeling analysis that included both level-1 (student-level) variables (i.e., gender and race/ethnicity), and level-2 (school-level) covariates (i.e., school size, proportion eligible for a free-reduced price meal, proportion of African American students), and the supportive school climate measure. In some preliminary analyses, we examined measures of central tendency and distribution of key variables and then conducted regression analyses to help clarify the contributions of our demographic variables and our measure of a supportive school climate to the prediction of the measure of student willingness to seek help. The regression analyses were conducted in part to investigate the potential role of shared method variance in contributing to study findings.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. Initial data checking showed that there were no missing data on school-level variables (e.g., school size, proportion of minority, and proportion of free and reduced price meals). There were minimal and negligible

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for control and key variables for 7318 students across 291 schools.

Variable	N	M	SD
School size	291	1207	687
Proportion African American	291	25%	24%
Proportion free and reduced meals	291	30%	16%
Willingness to Seek Help-Individual level	7318	22.2	4.66
Willingness to Seek Help-School level	291	22.2	1.67
Supportive School Climate-Individual level	7318	27.3	6.79
Supportive School Climate-School level	291	27.3	2.24

missing data on student-reported Supportive School Climate and Willingness to Seek Help variables (<1%). Because the minimal missing data were unlikely to alter the analysis results in a meaningful way, we did not consider missing data imputation procedures in subsequent analyses.

In addition, descriptive analysis revealed that the outcome variable (i.e., Willingness to Seek Help) was approximately normally distributed, with kurtosis being almost zero (−.02) and a small negative skewness (−.43). Similarly, the Supportive School Climate variable at the student level was also reasonably normal, with minimal negative kurtosis (−.14) and negative skewness (−.29). These data check findings suggested distributions that were appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses. An alpha level of .05 was used for statistical significance tests.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted with schools (rather than individual students) as the unit of analysis in order to identify differences between schools. In the first regression analysis (see Table 2), the school-level score for Willingness to Seek Help was predicted from the demographic variables of school size, proportion of African American students in the school, and proportion of students eligible for free and reduced price meals at step one. Demographic variables accounted for 15% of the variance in Willingness to Seek Help, $F(2, 291)=16.42$, $p<.001$. At step two, the school-level score for Supportive School Climate increased the R^2 from .15 to .44, $F(3, 291)=295.39$, $p<.001$.

One limitation of the initial regression analysis is that the Supportive School Climate and Willingness to Seek Help measures were both completed by the same students on the same survey instrument. This lack of independence between measures could generate an inflated correlation because of student response biases or other sources of shared method variance. In order to increase the independence of these two measures, the sample of students from each school was randomly split into two groups (1 and 2) nested within schools. This method ensured the independent and dependent variables were derived from different student informants who, nevertheless, attended the same school. More specifically,

Table 2
Hierarchical multiple regression analyses for supportive school climate and help seeking attitudes in full sample and split sample.

Variable	β	p	R^2 change	F	p
Full sample					
Control variables (Step 1)			.15	16.42**	<.001
School size	−0.04	.382			
Proportion African American	−0.08	.090			
Proportion free and reduced meals	0.03	.551			
Supportive School Climate	0.72**	<.001	.44	295.39**	<.001
Split sample					
Control variables (Step 1)			.10	9.93**	<.001
School size	0.02	.264			
Proportion African American	−0.24**	<.001			
Proportion free and reduced meals	0.13	.081			
Supportive School Climate-Group 1	0.34**	<.001	.10	36.72**	<.001

Note. Supportive School Climate scores obtained using the average of all individual students in the full sample and the average of a random half of the students in the split sample.
*$p<.05$, **$p<.001$.

perceptions of Supportive School Climate for each school were obtained by averaging the individual scores from students in group 1, while Willingness to Seek Help scores for each school were obtained from the students in group 2. In this way, school-level scores for Supportive School Climate and Willingness to Seek Help were determined for each school by using separate groups of students, although each group was approximately half the size of the original group for each school.

The Supportive School Climate scores based on group 1 were used to predict the Willingness to Seek Help scores based on group 2. In this second multiple regression analysis at the school level, the demographic variables of school size, the proportion of African American students, and the proportion of those receiving free and reduced price meals accounted for 10% of the variance in Willingness to Seek Help at step one, $F(2, 291)=9.93, p<.001$ (see Table 2). At step two, Supportive School Climate (based on student perceptions of support by group 1) predicted Willingness to Seek Help (based on student reports by group 2), $F(3, 291)=36.72, p<.001$.

In a split-sample analysis, perceptions of support in group 1 contributed to 10% of the variance in student help seeking in group 2, as opposed to the 44% found in the full sample. This change indicates that shared method variance could have inflated the relation between these variables by a substantial amount in the full sample analysis; however, a reliable connection between Supportive School Climate and Willingness to Seek Help was still present.

3.1. Potential race and gender differences

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics concerning the outcome variable (Willingness to Seek Help). The gender groups had a small effect ($d=.24$) size in favor of girls (i.e., girls reporting more willingness to seek help). The racial/ethnic groups also appeared to have some difference as reflected by relatively small effect sizes ($\omega=.10$ for all groups, and $d=.20$ for dichotomized group membership).

Table 3
Means and standard deviations on Willingness to Seek Help Scale by race and gender.

Source	Help seeking scale			
	N	M	SD	Effect size
Gender				$d=.24$
Boys	3681	21.7	4.81	
Girls	3589	22.8	4.43	
Race				$\omega=.10$
Caucasian	4524	22.6	4.45	
African American	1593	21.3	4.84	
Hispanic	384	22.3	5.04	
Asian American	226	22.8	4.36	
American Indian	86	21.2	5.43	
Other	345	21.0	4.86	
Bivariate Race				$d=.20$
African American	1,593	21.3	4.85	
Non-African American	5,563	22.2	4.57	

3.2. Hierarchical linear modeling analysis

As is widely known in the research literature, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) or multi-level modeling is an appropriate analysis procedure for nested data, as data nesting (e.g., students nested under schools) violates the independence assumption that is typical of one-level analysis approaches (e.g., analysis of variance and regression analysis). Failure to account for a nested data structure could have negative statistical consequences, such as inflated Type I error (e.g., Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In our case, students were nested within schools, and HLM could account for the variation of the outcome variable (i.e., student reported help seeking) at both individual and school levels; consequently, the contribution of both individual-level factors and that of school-level factors to an outcome variable could be evaluated. Specifically in our study, a two-level HLM analysis was used to evaluate the contribution of student-level factors (i.e., student race/ethnicity and gender) and that of school-level factors (i.e., school size, proportion free and reduced price meals, and Supportive School Climate) to the outcome variable of student Willingness to Seek Help.

Level 1 of the HLM model represented individual student-level factors. Within a particular school, outcome variable Y_{ij} at the student level (Willingness to Seek Help) was affected by individual student gender and race (i.e., African American vs. not African American). The effects of individual level factors were captured by the coefficients B_{1j} and B_{2j}.

Level-1 model:

$$Y = B_{0j} + B_{1j}(\text{Gender}) + B_{2j}(\text{Race}) + \underline{r_{ij}}$$

Student-perceived supportive climate was represented at Level 2. The school composition variables of size, proportion African American students, and FRPM were also controlled at level 2. School-level variables were included in the model as the coefficients γ_{01}, γ_{02}, γ_{03}, γ_{11}, γ_{12}, γ_{23}, γ_{21}, γ_{22}, and γ_{23}.

Level-2 model:

$$B_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}*(\text{School Size}) + \gamma_{02}*(\text{Proportion AA}) + \gamma_{03}*(\text{FRPM})$$
$$+ \gamma_{04}*(\text{supportive climate}) + U_{00}$$
$$B_{1j} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}*(\text{School Size}) + \gamma_{12}*(\text{Proportion AA}) + \gamma_{13}*(\text{FRPM})$$
$$+ \gamma_{14}*(\text{supportive climate}) + U_{11}$$
$$B_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}*(\text{School Size}) + \gamma_{22}*(\text{Proportion AA}) + \gamma_{23}*(\text{FRPM})$$
$$+ \gamma_{24}*(\text{supportive climate}) + U_{22}$$

In order to first assess whether or not any of the variation in student Willingness to Seek Help could be attributed to school-level factors, an intraclass coefficient (ICC) was calculated, and the resulting ICC was .088. The ICC indicates that approximately nine percent of the total variation in student Willingness to Seek Help occurred between schools

and supports the usefulness of HLM analysis to assess the relative contribution of individual and school-level factors to the outcome variable.

HLM analyses are presented in Table 4. Student-Level predictors at level-1 refer to the contribution of individual differences (i.e., race and gender) to the outcome variable (Willingness to Seek Help). On the Willingness to Seek Help scale, boys scored lower than girls, $B_{1j} = 1.03$, $p < .001$, and African American students scored lower than students from other racial groups, $B_{2j} = -.86$, $p < .001$. School-Level predictors at level-2 indicated that Supportive School Climate at the school level had a significant positive association with student Willingness to Seek Help for all students at the individual level, $\gamma_{04} = .59$, $p < .001$. Using nested HLM models (i.e., a reduced model without Level-2 Supportive School Climate, and a full model with Level-2 Supportive School Climate), we observed that Supportive School Climate accounted for one fourth of the total variation in Willingness to Seek Help between schools. No school composition variable (i.e., school size, proportion African American students, or proportion free and reduced price meals) was significantly associated with Willingness to Seek Help at the individual level.

With regards to the cross-level interaction between school climate and gender, higher Supportive School Climate scores were associated with less difference in Willingness to

Table 4
HLM analyses of individual-level and school-level factors associated with help seeking.

Measure	Parameter	Standardized estimate	SE
Student-level predictors-Level 1			
Gender (0: boy, 1: girl)	B_{1j}	1.03**	0.11
Race (0: Not AA,[a] 1: AA)	B_{2j}	-0.86**	0.14
School-level predictors-level 2			
Intercept	γ_{00}	5.47**	1.33
School size	γ_{01}	0.000078	0.000168
Proportion African American	γ_{02}	−0.40	0.55
Proportion free and reduced meals	γ_{03}	0.78	0.78
Supportive School Climate	γ_{04}	0.59**	0.04
Random effects-level 2			
Gender (Girls)			
Intercept	γ_{10}	5.79**	1.50
School size	γ_{11}	−0.000487*	0.000186
Proportion African American	γ_{12}	−0.004503	0.63
Proportion free and reduced meals	γ_{13}	−1.67	0.94
Supportive School Climate	γ_{14}	−0.13*	0.05
Race (African Americans)			
Intercept	γ_{20}	−1.12	2.06
School size	γ_{21}	0.000296	0.000199
Proportion African American	γ_{22}	0.62	0.76
Proportion free and reduced meals	γ_{23}	0.55	1.38
Supportive School Climate	γ_{24}	−0.01	0.07

Note. Random effects refer to the interaction between school-level differences and individual-level differences. Parameter estimates indicate the moderating effect of each variable on existing differences in help seeking for gender and race, with girls and African Americans as the reference groups.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .001$.
[a] African American.

Seek Help between boys and girls, $\gamma_{14}=-.13$, $p=.008$. Increases in Supportive School Climate were associated with increases in Willingness to Seek Help among both boys and girls, but Willingness to Seek Help among boys increased more than among girls, so that the discrepancy between genders was reduced. School size also was associated with reduced gender differences in help seeking, such that larger schools had smaller gender differences, $\gamma_{11}=-.05$, $p=.019$. With regards to the interaction between school climate and race, higher scores on the Supportive School Climate variable were not associated with significantly lower racial differences in Willingness to Seek Help, $\gamma_{24}=-.01$, $p=.894$. No other school composition variables were associated with significant reductions in racial differences in Willingness to Seek Help.

4. Discussion

Findings from this study indicate that ninth-grade student perceptions of a supportive school climate are important to student willingness to seek help from adults at school for bullying and threats of violence. Students who perceived their teachers as caring, respectful, and interested in them were more likely to assert that they would tell a teacher when they themselves or a classmate were being bullied, if a classmate brought a gun to school, or if a classmate threatened another student with violence. These findings are consistent with qualitative studies in which students stated that they would be more likely to seek help from adults with supportive qualities (Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998; Wilson & Deanne, 2001). Similarly, social-interactional theories of help seeking posit that students' feelings about potential helpers influence their decision to seek assistance (Newman, 1998). The relation between supportive school climate and help seeking was found at both the individual and school level. At the school level, supportive climate accounted for 44% of the variation among schools in levels of help seeking.

A correlational study cannot establish a causal effect; however, these results are consistent with the view that schools that place an emphasis on creating a supportive school climate will have increased student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence. Low-cost, well-validated prevention programs that target teacher support to students already exist. In their review of 40 programs to reduce behavior problems in schools, Freiberg and Lapointe (2006) found that programs that encouraged school connectedness and the development of caring and trusting relationships between teachers and students were most successful at achieving positive outcomes. Felner and Adan (1988) developed a transition program for ninth-grade students that provided each student with a teacher mentor. Longitudinal follow-up of this program revealed that students in the program not only had better grades and attendance records than students not in the program, but these students also reported more positive school experiences across several dimensions of support (Felner, Brand, Adan, & Mulhall, 1993).

The most extreme example of the value of student help seeking is the prevention of school shootings. Both the FBI and Secret Service studies of school shootings concluded that students typically communicated their plans in advance, so they urged schools to encourage students to come forward when a classmate learns of a peer's intentions or threats to commit a violent act (Cornell, 2006; Fein et al., 2002; O'Toole, 2000). Daniels et al. (2007) conducted a review of newspaper articles concerning 30 cases of foiled school

shootings. More than half were averted because other students informed school personnel or police. Furthermore, the FBI and the Secret Service studies (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002) revealed that many school shooters were victims of persistent bullying for which they did not seek or receive help. Most victims of bullying will not engage in violent acts, but more effective bullying prevention might address their needs before distress escalates to the point of plotting revenge. Bullying prevention programs stress the need to encourage a school climate in which both victims and bystanders are willing to seek help when bullying occurs (Neiman et al., 2009; Olweus, 1993).

4.1. Gender and help seeking

Girls in this sample were more willing to seek help than boys. This result is consistent with the multitude of studies that find that girls are more likely to seek help for all types of problems in school and out of school (Hunter et al., 2004; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Inspection of group means reveals that, in schools with high levels of support, the average difference between boys and girls in their willingness to seek help was cut approximately in half. In schools with low levels of support, the average difference between boys and girls in their willingness to seek help was almost five times greater than in the overall sample.

Attitudes toward help seeking in response to bullying and threats of violence may be particularly sensitive to gendered messages. Nadler (1998) hypothesized that boys less often seek help than girls because it is less socially acceptable for them to do so, and other studies have documented that boys who seek help perceive themselves as weak or socially ostracized (Eiser et al., 1995; Timlin-Scalera et al., 2003). An important factor in supportive teacher–student relationships may be their power to convey the normalcy and acceptability of help seeking.

4.2. Race/ethnicity and help seeking

African American students in this sample were less likely than students from any other racial/ethnic group to endorse a willingness to seek help from adults at school. This finding is troubling and deserving further investigation. In a study of strategies to deal with peer problems, Farrell et al. (2008) conducted qualitative interviews of 109 African American middle-school students in Richmond, Virginia. The researchers found that almost 60% of these students expressed beliefs that supported the use of aggression in response to bullying and threats of violence. Students stated that name calling and bullying warranted physical retaliation and that they had no choice but to respond with violence to physical aggression from peers.

Anderson (1999) has suggested that aggressive attitudes and codes of behavior may represent an adaptive response to neighborhood conditions that African American students more often experience. Differences in beliefs about appropriate responses to bullying and aggression held by different racial/ethnic groups may partially explain differences in student attitudes towards seeking help for conflict with peers. Another contributing factor may be that African American students experience higher rates of suspension and expulsion at school. These experiences may lead them to be less trusting of school authorities and to

believe that disclosure through help seeking will result in negative consequences (APA Task Force on Zero Tolerance, 2008).

More information is needed about the factors affecting African American students' decisions about help seeking so that targeted intervention efforts can be made with both teachers and students. The primary goal in any school should be to prevent bullying and threats of violence from occurring at all, and the secondary goal should be to encourage all students to seek help when it occurs. However, bullying is so ubiquitous that bullying prevention programs urge school officials to encourage students to report and seek help for bullying, and to train administrators and teachers in effective ways to respond to bullying (Olweus, 1993). It may be useful for school staff to address cultural messages that discourage help seeking by distinguishing between snitching for personal gain and seeking help to prevent violence. One common reason why students are reluctant to seek help is that they regard it as a form of snitching (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). The "stop snitching" message is found in rap music, youth fashion, and video games (Hampson, 2006). Educating students about the differences between snitching and seeking help may help reduce any fears associated with talking to authority figures. In addition, cultural sensitivity training for school staff could be useful in some schools (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Gregory and Ripski (2009) studied teacher use of relational discipline as an effective method of intervention specifically with African American students.

4.3. Strengths and limitations

This study demonstrated a statistical effect of supportive climate on help-seeking attitudes after controlling for demographic risk factors and using a model that considered the nesting of student measures within schools. A noteworthy strength of this study was the ability to examine school variation in a nearly complete state population of public high schools. The 93% school participation rate for this study is notable because schools with high levels of discipline problems or low investment in student support may be less likely to participate in research. An important limitation of this study is its cross-sectional, correlational design. An experimental design is needed to confirm the theory that a more supportive climate increases help seeking. In addition, this study examined willingness to seek help and perceptions of school climate among only ninth-grade students, so that findings may not apply to elementary or middle-school children or to adolescents in the upper grades of high school. Studies indicate that attitudes towards help seeking change as students mature (Newman et al., 2001; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Smith et al., 2001), so the effects of a supportive school climate may differ according to students' developmental stages.

Another limitation of this study is that measures of both help seeking and support were obtained from the same student self-report survey, which raises the possibility that shared method variance and student response biases inflated the relation between perceptions of support and help seeking. This potential problem is evident in other student survey studies (e.g., Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007; Singer & Flannery, 2000; Solberg & Olweus, 2003), but we know of no recognized approach to address it. To address this potential problem, we conducted a novel split-sample analysis that used separate groups of students in each school to calculate the school-level measures of supportive school climate and willingness to seek

help. As expected, regression analyses using the split-sample approach produced lower estimates of the contribution of supportive school climate to student willingness to seek help. Although there was a reduction in explained variance, these findings still demonstrate a relation between support and willingness to seek help using independent groups of students to assess school-level characteristics.

Although the use of a split sample permits a more rigorous test using independent measures, the explained variance may not actually be as low as the 10% found in the split sample. Because the scores for each scale in the split sample analysis were based on a smaller sample, the reliability of those scores may have been reduced in a way that diminished their correlation with each other. For instance, the variance in student help seeking accounted for by school demographic variables was 15% using the full sample and 10% using the split sample. The higher correspondence between student help seeking and school demographic variables in the full sample could not have been inflated by shared method variance because demographic variables were not based on student report, yet the correlation was reduced in the smaller sample. This pattern suggests that the reduction in explained variance in help seeking (44% to 10%) associated with a supportive school climate is not solely a function of the lack of independence between the two student measures in the full sample analysis, but it may also be a function of reduced sample size. Although needing further study, our split sample analysis may be useful in accounting for the lack of independence among reporters present in many studies that rely on single sources of data. This analysis can be undertaken whenever there are nested data and the research question requires the examination of higher level effects (e.g., school or classroom effects) derived from individual student data.

A final, more general limitation is that help seeking was measured by student self-report, which might not correspond with student help-seeking behavior. Research in the field of social psychology recognizes the complex relations between attitudes and behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Recent studies suggest that emotional activation (Seitz, Lord, & Taylor, 2007), social norms (Fisher, 2009; Smith & Louis, 2008), and individual differences in cognitive style and affect regulation (Conner, Perugini, O'Gorman, Ayres, & Prestwich, 2007) are some of the variables that limit the ability to predict behavior directly from expressed attitudes. Future studies would benefit from independent measures of help-seeking behavior.

4.4. Summary

This study found that supportive school climate was associated with more positive help-seeking attitudes among students for bullying and threats of violence. These correlational findings suggest that support to students may be instrumental in increasing school safety, and future studies should investigate a causal relation between supportive school climate and help seeking. Both racial/ethnic and gender differences in help-seeking attitudes were observed. African American students were less willing to seek help than students from other racial groups and perceptions of support did not reduce this difference. Not enough is known about how African American students experience their school environments and additional research is needed on how to encourage help seeking among these students. Boys were less likely to seek help than girls, but supportive climate moderated this difference such that supportive school climate was associated with reduced gender discrepancies in help seeking. These

findings suggest that support to students could be a useful tool to counter undesirable social norms regarding bullying and violence.

This study shows that there is a relation between student perceptions of school climate and help seeking attitudes at both the individual student level and at the school level. The latter finding is especially important because it suggests that differences among schools in their climate are meaningful with regards to student willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence. Future research should determine whether school-wide interventions aimed at instilling a more supportive school climate have beneficial effects on school safety strategies that rely on student willingness to seek help.

Acknowledgements

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