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SCHOOL CHOICE AND SCHOOL SAFETY
Reviewing the School Safety Evidence on Private
and Charter Schools in the U.S.

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Abstract

We examine the literature linking private and charter schooling to perceptions of student safety in United States schools. The results are generally null to positive for student, parent, and principal reports of school safety for the eight studies on safety in public charter schools and the eleven studies on safety in private schools. None of the existing studies find evidence to suggest that private or charter schools reduce perceptions of school safety overall. Although more research is needed, the most rigorous evidence on this topic suggests that private and public charter schools are generally associated with higher levels of safety as reported by students, parents, and principals.

Keywords: private schooling; charter schools; school choice; school safety; school violence

JEL Classifications: I28, I20

Introduction

Outside of homeschooling and virtual education, families in the U.S. have two main schooling alternatives to district-run public schools: private schools and public charter schools. Private schools make up 25 percent of all U.S. schools and serve around 9 percent of the school-aged population.¹ In the past, access to these schools was limited to families who had the resources to pay out of pocket, yet state-based private school vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and education savings accounts (ESAs) have made private schools accessible to lower-income families. Today, 18 states operate 29 voucher programs which assist more than 188,000 children to pay tuition at a selected school. Eighteen states also operate 23 tax-credit scholarship programs which help approximately 482,000 students receive full or partial private school scholarships. Five states (Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee) operate ESAs, which provide a portion of state per-pupil funding directly to families in order to pay for private school tuition and other education-related services, products, or providers, such as online learning, textbooks, and private tutoring. More than 21,000 children currently use an ESA to pay for private school tuition or craft customized learning experiences for themselves.²

Charter schools are public schools of choice, meaning that families are not assigned to them based on residence. As public schools, charter schools in the U.S. must comply with federal education laws and are prohibited from charging tuition and having a religious affiliation.³ In general, public charter schools are not allowed to use selective admissions processes and must use a random admissions lottery when the number of students applying for the school exceeds capacity. Public charter schools differ from district-run schools because they are privately operated and therefore generally have more autonomy than district-run schools. Students are also generally residentially assigned to district-run schools, which is not the case with public charter schools.⁴ The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991 and the first charter school opened in 1992. In the last three decades, charter schools expanded to 45 states, D.C. and Puerto Rico. In 2019, more than 7,000 public charter schools were operational, enrolling around 3.2 million students (Education Week, 2019).

¹ School Choice in the United States. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/schoolchoice/ind_01.asp

² Engage: Fast Facts. EdChoice. Retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/resource-hub/fast-facts/>

³ What is a Charter School? National Charter School Resource Center. United States Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/what-charter-school>

⁴ School Choice in the United States. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/schoolchoice/ind_01.asp

Researchers have conducted several evaluations of the academic outcomes of public charter schools and private school choice programs in the U.S. For example, Betts and Tang (2019) performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of 38 studies and found that public charter schools increased reading test scores by around 2 percent of a standard deviation and increased math test scores by around 3.3 percent of a standard deviation. However, Betts and Tang (2019) found a large amount of variation in their findings. For example, they found that public charter schools produced “higher achievement gains in math relative to traditional public schools in elementary and middle but not high schools. For reading achievement charter schools on average are producing higher gains in middle schools but not in elementary or high schools.” Zimmer et al. (2019) also reviewed the academic impacts of public charter schools and concluded that “lottery-based analyses have generally shown strong positive effects on student achievement of charter school admission and enrollment.”

Shakeel, Anderson, and Wolf (2016) performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of the random assignment studies of private school choice programs around the world. Although Shakeel, Anderson, and Wolf (2016) found null to positive effects of private school choice programs on academic outcomes overall, two programs in the United States produced negative results for test scores in initial years (Dynarski et al., 2018; Mills & Wolf, 2017). EdChoice (2020) more recently reviewed the random assignment studies linking private school choice programs in the U.S. to math and reading test scores. EdChoice (2020) found that 10 of the 17 random assignment studies on the topic found positive effects of private school choice programs on math or reading test scores overall or for subgroups of students, whereas only two of the 17 studies found statistically significant negative effects. Four of the studies did not find statistically significant differences overall, and one study found mixed results.

Foreman (2017) reviewed the literature linking public charter schools and private school choice programs in the U.S. to educational attainment outcomes such as high school graduation and college enrollment and found positive effects overall (e.g. Wolf et al., 2013), although the number of studies on the topic was limited. EdChoice (2020) more recently reviewed the studies on the topic and found that four of six studies found positive effects for at least one subgroup of students, whereas the remaining two studies did not find statistically significant effects. Three systematic reviews of the literature also found that competition from private school choice programs is generally associated with positive effects on the academic outcomes of the students who remain in district-run public schools (EdChoice, 2020; Egalite, 2013; Jabbar et al., 2019).

Although the academic outcomes of schools are important to review, parents select private schools and public charter schools for a variety of reasons (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016; Holmes Erickson, 2017; Prieto et al., 2019). In a review of the literature on how parents select private schools when participating in school choice programs, Holmes Erickson (2017) found that parents value academic and nonacademic features of schools and make trade-offs among their preferences. Although academics are important to families when they select schools for their children, safety is also a major concern. Notably, in a statewide survey of over 14,000 respondents who applied for a private school scholarship for their children, Florida families ranked safety as one of the most important school qualities, second only to faith and values instruction (Bedrick & Burke, 2018). Specifically, Bedrick and Burke (2018) found that 36 percent of families listed safety as one of their top three factors that influenced their decision to have their child attend their chosen school. At the same time, only 4 percent of families listed “standardized test scores” as one of their top three factors that influenced their school decision.

Similarly, among Indiana families, the second most influential school quality reported by parents was safety (Catt & Rhinesmith, 2017). Specifically, Catt and Rhinesmith (2017) found that 53 percent of families using a private school voucher program and 59 percent of families using a tax-credit scholarship program to send their children to private schools in Indiana reported that safety was a factor in choosing private schools for their children. Kelly and Scafidi (2013) similarly found that 38 percent of parents using a private school choice program in Georgia indicated “improved student safety” as one of their top three reasons for choosing a private school for their child. The only factor that was more influential to the parents in the sample in Georgia was “better student discipline,” which is also related to student safety (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013).

Some economists and education researchers have theorized that residential assignment to district-run schools in the United States creates large transaction costs associated with choosing alternatives (Friedman, 1997; Hanushek et al., 2007). If a family is not satisfied with the services provided by their residentially assigned public school, they generally only have a few costly or ineffective options in a system without public charter schools or private school choice programs. The dissatisfied family can pay for a private school out of pocket while still paying for the residentially assigned school through taxes, incur the costs associated with homeschooling while still paying for the residentially assigned school through taxes, move to a residence that is assigned to a higher quality district-run school, or advocate for better services for their child to the leaders of their current residentially assigned district-run school.

Some economists have theorized that the high transaction costs associated with switching schools leads to a large degree of monopoly power in the K–12 education system in the U.S. (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Friedman, 1955; Hoxby, 2007). In theory, the monopoly power held by the producers of educational services could put a downward pressure on the quality of the services provided as perceived by students and their families. Access to educational alternatives such as public charter schools and private schools could theoretically improve school quality by introducing competitive pressures into the education system and by improving matches between educators and students (DeAngelis, 2018b; DeAngelis & Holmes Erickson, 2018; Egalite, 2013; Jabbar et al., 2019).

Because families consider their children’s safety when choosing schools (Bedrick & Burke, 2018; Kelly & Scafidi, 2013), we might expect access to public charters schools and private schools to lead to a reduction in school safety problems. For example, Cordes (2018) found that competition from public charter schools was associated with improvements in school safety in nearby district-run public schools in New York City. Public charter schools and private schools might also have a competitive advantage at reducing school safety problems because these schools generally have more autonomy with discipline policies than district-run schools (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2017). It is also theoretically possible that access to public charter schools and private schools could reduce student safety since these schools are generally less well-funded than district-run schools (Batdorff et al., 2014; DeAngelis et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2017) and because advertising could limit families’ abilities to make fully informed decisions (Lubienski, 2007).

Families continually rank safety as an essential factor when they select a school. Several studies illustrate the importance of safety to parents, students, and teachers. Students’ perceptions of school safety offer key insights into a school’s atmosphere. Student surveys suggest that charter schools in New York have a statistically significant safety advantage over neighboring traditional public schools even after accounting for demographics (Eden, 2017). Out of 150 charter schools, Eden (2017) found that 24 charter schools were less safe, 62 charter schools were as safe, and 64 charter schools were safer than traditional public schools. Similarly, researchers analyzed nationally representative data from the Education Next (2016) survey to compare parent satisfaction in charter and district schools regarding safety. Their analysis found that parents of charter school students were more likely to be satisfied with school safety than district school parents, but the difference was not statistically significant (Barrows et al., 2017).

Safety can be an important factor driving the school selection process among parents who enroll their children in charter schools (Bancroft, 2009). Charter schools can be seen as a family’s only school option when district schools are perceived as unsafe (Villaciencio, 2013). Washington, D.C. parents, for

example, reported that charter schools felt like safer places for their children than traditional public schools (Teske, Schneider, Buckley & Clark, 2000). Eighty percent of parents participating in a survey of charter schools in Pennsylvania felt that their charter school was safe. Seventy one percent of parents listed school safety as their top reason for choosing their child's charter school (Miron & Nelson, 2000). Charter school parents also perceived school cleanliness, newness, and a school emphasis on rules and behavioral codes as indicative of school safety. Hamlin (2019) suggests that charter schools' regular attempts to build relationships with parents could influence parental perceptions of school safety.

School safety is also important to school faculty and staff. Out of 10 options, teachers ranked safety fourth as an important reason for seeking charter school employment. Moreover, 84 percent of charter school teachers perceived their schools as safe (Miron & Nelson, 2000). At the same time, charter school principals consistently rank maintaining safety as a fundamental aspect of their role and is something in which they feel confident of their abilities and have influence (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). District-run public school faculties, however, generally report safety problems, such as fights, bullying, physical abuse of teachers, and possession of weapons, more frequently than charter school teachers and school leaders, even though charter school safety approaches do not differ much (Christenson, 2007).

This descriptive research suggests that students, parents, and teachers generally perceive private schools and public charter schools as safer environments than district-run public schools. These findings underscore the importance of safety in the school selection process for both parents and teachers. DeAngelis and Wolf (2019) summarized the evidence on private school choice and safety in the United States and found six studies on the topic. Their review found that each of the six studies on the topic reported statistically significant safety benefits associated with private school choice as reported by students, parents, or principals.

However, to our knowledge, no formal reviews of the evidence linking both private and charter school choice to safety outcomes exist. We add to the literature by formally summarizing the rigorous evidence linking private and charter school choice in the United States to measures of safety as reported by students, parents, and principals. Specifically, we build on DeAngelis and Wolf (2019) by including additional studies linking private schooling to safety and by including evaluations of public charter schools relative to district-run public schools.

Methodology

We review studies from 2000 to the present to focus on relevant recent evaluations. We bounded our key word searches by “charter school” or “private school”, and “safety,” “climate,” and “environment,” and limiting our search to U.S.-based schools. We also consult experts in the field to supplement our search.

Studies had to meet each of the following four criteria for inclusion in our review of the literature:

1. Quantitative studies using experimental or quasi-experimental designs such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs), randomized field trials (RFTs), regression discontinuity design (RDD), instrumental variables regression, and matching methodology. Regression analyses with control variables are also included (N=11). Studies comparing students’ or parents’ perceptions of their previous public schools to their current private or charter schools are also included.
2. The study must include estimates of effects of private or charter schools on student, parent, or principal perceptions of school safety or climate.
3. Journal publications or working papers.
4. Evaluations from within the United States.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Qualitative studies such as case studies, newspaper accounts, and general inquiries.
2. Theoretical analyses.
3. Non-English language papers.

We narrowed down our findings to only include the studies that matched our inclusion criteria describing perceptions of school safety. We use a vote-counting method to determine the state of the scientific evidence on the topic of school choice and safety. We classify the study as “positive” if the majority of the statistically significant safety results are in favor of private or charter schools, “negative” if the majority of the statistically significant safety results are in favor of district-run public schools, and “null” if the researchers did not find statistically significant differences between sectors overall. Our search found two randomized control trials (RCTs) that examined data concerning school safety in charter schools, and six studies employing regression methods contrasting public charter schools with district-run public schools or a student’s previous school. From our search results pertaining to private schools, our

findings included three RCTs that examined private school safety perceptions. We also found eight studies that used regression analysis or matching procedures to compare perceptions of school safety between public and private sectors.

We found some purely descriptive studies that we excluded from the review. For example, Christensen (2007) analyzes data from the Schools and Staffing Survey and reports that “teachers and principals in traditional public schools consistently report more frequent safety problems in their schools than do teachers and principals in charter schools” (Christensen, 2007, p. 4). However, we exclude this study from our review because controls are not included for observable differences in students or schools between sectors.

Review Content

In our review, we found eight studies pertaining to charter school safety in the United States that met our inclusion criteria (Table 1). Two of these studies focused on student perceptions of charter school safety in Detroit and Texas. Two studies examined parents’ perceptions of charter school safety across various states. Four studies examined principal reports of school safety incidents in public charter schools relative to district-run public schools. Seven of the eight studies indicated school safety advantages overall for public charter schools relative to nearby district-run public schools. One study did not find evidence of differences in school safety between sectors (Gleason et al., 2010), and zero of the eight studies indicated school safety advantages for district-run public schools overall.

We found eleven studies examining the link between access to private schooling and reports of safety. Six of the eleven studies included results for private schools participating in school choice programs (Table 2), and six of the studies included results for private schools overall (Table 3). Four of these studies exclusively focused on students’ perceptions of school safety, three of these studies exclusively focused on parents’ perceptions of school safety, and two of these studies exclusively focused on principals’ perceptions of school safety. The two remaining studies examined both student and parent perceptions of school safety. Each of these eleven studies indicated school safety advantages overall for private schools relative to public schools as reported by students, parents, or school leaders. None of the eleven studies found school safety advantages overall for public schools relative to private schools.

Student Perceptions of Public Charter School Safety

Student perceptions of safety provide immediate feedback on a school's climate. Safety is fundamental to a healthy classroom environment; its absence can lead to lower academic student gains (Barrett, 2003). Using a hierarchical linear model, Barrett (2003) compared Texas student perceptions of their current charter school with their previous school, and found that a good environment had a major impact on positive student perceptions of their charter schools. Namely, "A friendly, safe, and comfortable environment was associated most closely with student comparative satisfaction" (Barrett, 2003, p. 356).

Hamlin (2017) examined student-reported survey data to compare perceptions of safety in public charter schools to district-run public schools in Detroit. Using multiple regression models, he found that access to public charter schools was associated with improved student perceptions of safety in charter schools. However, when controlling for parental involvement and commute distance, "the positive relationship between charter schools and perceived school safety decreased substantially, losing their statistical significance" (Hamlin, 2017, p.746-747) In light of these effects, only neighborhood public charter schools (primary schools that have an average commute of 2.5 miles or less, and secondary schools that have an average commute of 3.5 miles or less) maintained their statistically significant school safety advantage relative to district-run public schools in the area (Hamlin, 2017).

Parent Perceptions of Public Charter School Safety

The U.S. Department of Education performed an experimental study to evaluate safety by measuring charter school impacts at 36 charter middle schools across 15 states. The researchers compared reports of parents of students who won random lotteries to attend public charter schools to parents of students who did not win admissions lotteries. Gleason et al. (2010) found that winning a lottery to attend a public charter school was associated with an 11 percent of a standard deviation improvement in safety as measured by an index of parents' reported concerns about their children's problems with getting into trouble, smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, friends, academic achievement, and safety; however, the difference was not statistically significant. The researchers additionally found that winning the lottery to attend a public charter school was associated with a statistically significant 34 percent of a standard deviation increase in parents' reports of how well their children were adjusted to their schools. This measure could arguably be a proxy for school climate since it included parents' reports of how well their children got along with others, worked hard, were creative, and were happy.

While the U.S. Department of Education’s findings regarding charter school safety were null, one other more recent random assignment study about parents’ perceptions of safety in charter schools indicated positive outcomes for students. In a study of Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools, Mathematica Policy Research found that parents of middle school students reported that their children were significantly more likely to be safe at their charter school than at the district-run public school as measured by an index of satisfaction and an index of parental perceptions of problems in school (Tuttle et al., 2015). For example, winning a lottery to attend a KIPP charter school reduced an index of parents’ perceptions of problems in their children’s schools by about 10 percent. The measure of school safety problems captured reports of incidents of students destroying property, students being late for school, students missing school, fighting, bullying, and stealing.

Principal Perceptions of Public Charter School Safety

Charter school leaders also report healthier school environments than their district-run public school counterparts. Using data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) 2011-2012 questionnaire, Shakeel and DeAngelis (2018) compared traditional public and charter school principal self-reported safety problems and safety related practices. Using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “happens daily” to “never occurs,” principals reported the occurrences of various safety problems in their schools. Charter school principals’ “never occur” responses regarding physical conflicts between students, student possession of weapons, gang activities, and physical abuse of teachers indicated statistically significant positive safety outcomes. The authors also examined the difference between safety practices in charter and district schools. They found that charter schools were less likely to perform random metal detector checks and perform random dog sniffs to check for drugs. Instead, charter schools were more likely to require students to wear uniforms and enforce a strict dress code. In sum, the authors found that even though charter schools were less likely to adhere to some safety practices, charter school principals’ reports indicated that their schools were less likely to experience some safety problems than district schools (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2018).

DeAngelis and Lueken (2020) leveraged the SASS 2011-2012 questionnaire to survey school leaders. They found that although charter schools implemented less restrictive safety procedures than traditional public schools, they were “47 percentage points less likely to control access to school grounds, 44 percentage points less likely close campus during lunch, 23 percentage points less likely to use random

dog sniffs, and 21 percentage points less likely to perform random sweeps for contraband” (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2020). Charter schools, however, were more likely to enforce strict dress codes and require students to wear uniforms. Additionally, charter schools were “28 percentage points more likely to never report having students abuse teachers, and 15 percentage points more likely to never report having gang activities” (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2020). However, charter schools indicated that physical fights between students and bullying were 5 percentage points less likely to be reported as “never occurring” (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2020).

DeAngelis (2020b) compared differences in reports of thirteen school safety problems between public school sectors in New York in the 2017-18 school year. After controlling for several observable differences in students between sectors, the study found that public charter schools demonstrated school safety advantages for seven of the eight statistically significant results. Public charter schools reported fewer assaults, sex offenses, weapons possessions, and false alarms than district-run public schools. The charter school safety advantages tended to be moderate to large in size. For example, public charter schools in New York reported 59 percent fewer assaults with serious physical injuries and 79 percent fewer forcible sex offenses. However, district-run public schools in New York reported fewer instances of cyberbullying per pupil than public charter schools. The public charter school safety advantages tended to be larger for New York City than the rest of the state.

Public schools in Pennsylvania are required to report counts of several different school safety problems each school year. DeAngelis (2020a) used publicly available data compared differences in reports of 58 school safety problems between sectors in the 2018-19 school year. After controlling for observable differences in schools and students, DeAngelis (2020a) found that public charter schools generally reported fewer school safety problems than district-run public schools in the state. Specifically, relative to similar district-run public schools in the state, 27 of 30 statistically significant results indicated safety advantages for brick-and-mortar charter schools and each of the 21 statistically significant results indicated safety advantages for virtual public charter schools. The safety advantages tended to be more pronounced for charter schools located in Philadelphia County than for charter schools located in the rest of the state and for charter schools serving students in grades nine through 12 than for charter schools serving students in other grade levels.

Table 1. Access to Public Charter Schools and Reports of School Safety

Study	Location	Method	Respondent	Result
Gleason et al. (2010)	United States	RCT	Parent	Null
Tuttle et al. (2015)	Various States	RCT	Parent	+
Barrett (2003)	Texas	Hierarchical Linear Model	Student	+
Hamlin (2017)	Detroit, MI	Regression Analysis	Student	+*
DeAngelis (2020a)	Pennsylvania	Regression Analysis	Principal	+
DeAngelis (2020b)	New York	Regression Analysis	Principal	+
DeAngelis & Lueken (2020)	Indiana	Regression Analysis	Principal	+
Shakeel, DeAngelis (2018)	United States	Regression Analysis	Principal	+

Notes: "RCT" is "Randomized Controlled Trial." "Null" means that no statistically significant effects are reported for the outcome in the study. A "+" means that the study indicates a statistically significant benefit of charter school safety overall.

*The charter school safety advantages detected in Hamlin (2017) remain statistically significant only for neighborhood charter schools after controls were used.

Student Perceptions of Private School Safety

Students enrolled in private schools also indicated that they perceived their private schools as safer than at district-run public school peers. Wolf et al. (2010) found that students and parents perceived no safety difference between private schools participating in D.C.'s lottery-based voucher program and public schools (Table 2). However, nearly a decade later, Webber et al. (2019) found that students perceived private schools participating in the D.C. lottery-based voucher program to be safer. This most recent random assignment evaluation found that using the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program to attend a private school increased the likelihood that students reported being in a "very safe" school by 34 percent (Webber et al., 2019).

Fan, Williams, and Corkin (2011) used a nationally representative sample of over 16,000 students from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 and found that after controlling for several observable differences in students and schools, students in private schools reported significantly higher levels of order, safety, and discipline than their peers in public schools (Table 3). Using data from the School Crime Supplement of the National Crime Victimization Survey, Farina (2019) employed regression models and found that "private school students in particular reported a more positive school climate and less bullying" than their peers in public schools in the U.S. Using data from a nationwide sample of over 10,000 students, Lleras (2008) employed a hierarchical linear model and found that "private schools

manage to create a climate in which the chance of students misbehavior in class and fear of abuse is greatly reduced from the level observed in public schools.” In addition, Lleras (2008) reported that “private schools are best at minimizing disruptions within the classroom, as well as fostering a non-hostile and safe school environment.”

Parent Perceptions of Private School Safety

The evidence suggests parents also perceived private schools as safer than district-run public school counterparts. Webber et al. (2019) noted that, unlike their children, parents did not perceive a difference between schools participating in D.C.’s lottery-based voucher program and public schools. Wolf et al. (2010), however, found that parents perceived private schools participating in D.C.’s voucher program as safer than public schools. Specifically, Wolf et al. (2010) found that winning a lottery and using a voucher to attend a private school in D.C. increased parents’ reports of school climate by 17 percent of a standard deviation. Similarly, parents from D.C., New York, and Dayton Ohio perceived private schools participating in lottery-based voucher programs as safer than public schools (Howell & Peterson, 2006). In Milwaukee, parents of students using the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to attend private schools reported lower levels of school safety problems than parents of observationally similar students in nearby public schools (Witte et al., 2008). Using propensity score matching, Waasdorp et al. (2018) found that seven of the nine statistically significant results from the main analysis indicated school climate advantages for parochial schools relative to public schools.

Dyehouse et al. (2020) evaluated the Florida Hope Scholarship Program using parental surveys from the 2018-19 school year. The Hope Scholarship Program is the first private school choice program in the United States designed to provide financial assistance to students who are the victims of violence or bullying in their district-run schools. Dyehouse et al. (2020) surveyed parents of students using the program and asked them to rate their children’s prior public school and the private school they selected on engagement, safety, and environment. The results indicated that relative to their children’s prior public schools, parents rated their children’s new private schools 98 percent higher on safety, 78 percent higher on environment, 104 percent higher on engagement, and 94 percent higher overall.

Principal Perceptions of Private School Safety

Private school leaders indicate that private schools maintain safer atmospheres than traditional public schools. Researchers found that while private schools implemented less restrictive school safety practices than district-run public schools, their principals were “more likely than traditional public school leaders to report ‘never’ having problems such as physical conflicts among students, theft, vandalism, students possessing weapons, student physically abusing teachers, racial tensions, students verbally abusing teachers, widespread disorder in classrooms, disrespect for teachers by students, and gang activities” (DeAngelis & Lueken, 2020). The researchers found that these safety differences between sectors remained statistically significant after controlling for observable school-level characteristics such as the number of minority students, number of minority teachers, number of full-time teachers, number of low-income students, number of English language learners, urbanicity, and principal respondent characteristics. These safety advantages remained for private schools participating in the state’s two private school choice programs (Table 2).

Shakeel and DeAngelis (2018) used nationally representative data from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey. Shakeel and DeAngelis (2018) noted that private school principals self-reported fewer safety problems, and, at the same time, implemented less restrictive safety practices than nearby district-run public schools. Shakeel and DeAngelis (2018) found that after controlling for observable differences in students between sectors, private schools reported school safety advantages for each of the 13 discipline problems examined. For example, private schools were about 8 percentage points less likely to have physical fights, 12 percentage points less likely to have students using illegal drugs, and 18 percentage points less likely to have gang activities than nearby district-run schools. In addition, private schools were less likely to use school safety practices such as requiring students to pass through metal detectors each day and requiring students to use clear backpacks. The researchers hypothesize that “one systematic advantage for private schools comes in the form of fewer restrictions related to school climate and safety that might make students feel more comfortable and trustworthy” (Shakeel & DeAngelis, 2018, p. 441).

Table 2. Access to Private School Choice Programs and Reports of School Safety

Study	Location	Program	Method	Respondent	Result
Webber et al. (2019)	D.C.	OSP	RCT	Parent	Null
				Student	+
Wolf et al. (2010)	D.C.	OSP	RCT	Parent	+
				Student	Null
Howell & Peterson (2006)	D.C., New York, and Dayton, Ohio	CSF	RCT	Parent	+
Witte et al. (2008)	Milwaukee, WI	MPCP	Matching	Parent	+
Dyehouse et al. (2020)	Florida	Hope Scholarship Program	Comparison with Prior School	Parent	+
DeAngelis & Lueken (2020)	Indiana	CSP and SSTC	Regression Analysis	Principal	+

Notes: "RCT" is "Randomized Controlled Trial." "Null" means that no statistically significant effects are reported for the outcome in the study. A "+" means that the study indicates a statistically significant benefit of private school safety overall. "OSP" is "D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program." "CSF" is "Children's Scholarship Fund." "MPCP" is "Milwaukee Parental Choice Program." "CSP" is "Choice Scholarship Program" and "SSTC" is "School Scholarship Tax Credit."

Table 3. Access to Private Schools and Reports of School Safety

Study	Location	Method	Respondent	Result
Fan, Williams, & Corkin (2011)	United States	Regression Analysis	Student	+
Farina (2019)	United States	Regression Analysis	Student	+
Lleras (2008)	United States	Hierarchical Linear Model	Student	+
Waasdorp et al. (2018)	United States	Matching	Student	+
DeAngelis & Lueken (2020)	Indiana	Regression Analysis	Principal	+
Shakeel & DeAngelis (2018)	United States	Regression Analysis	Principal	+

Notes: "RCT" is "Randomized Controlled Trial." "Null" means that no statistically significant effects are reported for the outcome in the study. A "+" means that the study indicates a statistically significant benefit of private school safety overall. These results do not include estimates for access to private school choice programs.

Conclusion

This review of the literature found that charter school safety is important to students and their families. Eight studies find that charter school safety outcomes are null to positive. Each of the eleven studies on the topic find that access to private schooling is associated with improvements in safety as reported by students, parents, or school leaders. None of the studies included in the review concluded that access to public charter schools or private schools was associated with reductions in reports of school safety overall.

These positive safety results suggest that increasing access to public charter schools and private schools can increase safety for students. States can increase access to public charter schools by lifting caps on the number of charter schools that are allowed to operate and by equalizing per pupil funding between school sectors (DeAngelis et al., 2018; DeAngelis, 2020c; Batdorff et al., 2014; Wolf et al., 2018). Public charter schools and private schools would theoretically have stronger financial incentives to expand capacity if states allow the same amount of education dollars to follow the student regardless of the type of school that is chosen.

States can increase access to private schools by enacting and expanding private school choice programs such as vouchers, ESAs, and tax-credit scholarships. Florida enacted and launched the first private school choice program in the United States for students who are victims of bullying or violence in their district-run public schools. Other states could enact similar policies to help vulnerable groups of students gain access to private schools in the event that they do not feel safe at their district-run public schools. In addition, because families choose schools based on multiple dimensions of quality such as safety and discipline, states should consider the potential costs of deterring private schools from participating in choice programs with standardized testing mandates (DeAngelis, 2019; DeAngelis, Burke, & Wolf, 2019; Wolf, Hitt, & McShane, 2018).

However, caution is needed in the interpretation of these findings. Although we bound our review to those rigorous studies using experimental or quasi-experimental designs, concerns with external validity of the findings may remain. The very presence of a lottery means a given charter school is oversubscribed, which is possibly the result of the charter school being a high-performer relative to other schools in the market. However, it is also possible that the presence of a lottery provides a school with some degree of monopoly power; if a family is dissatisfied, an oversubscribed charter school could theoretically ignore

their concerns and replace their child with a student who is waiting in line (DeAngelis, 2018a). On the other hand, the external validity of the random assignment studies of private school choice programs is not limited in the same way since the lottery generally occurs when the program is oversubscribed rather than when a school is oversubscribed. Most of these studies do not examine the safety problems and practices of charter schools across the nation in detail. Additionally, most of the studies do not employ random assignment methodology, which suggests that selection bias could affect their results. Students with families seeking out alternative educational options might differ on unobserved characteristics which could affect their perceptions about safety.

Most of these studies rely on perceptions of school safety as reported by students and their parents, meaning that results could potentially be affected by choice-supportive bias (Lind et al., 2017). In this sense, the results from the studies examining differences in school safety problems between sectors as reported by school leaders may be the most reliable. Although individual school leaders may have an incentive to underreport school safety problems if they want to make their school appear more desirable, a few of the charter school studies included in the review examine data from states that require all public schools to report the safety incidents each year.

The literature surrounding access to public charter schools and school safety is quite limited. Tuttle et al. (2015) indicate that parents perceive charter schools as safer than district-run schools. At the same time, Gleason et al. (2010) showed that parents saw no difference in safety between charter schools and traditional public schools. Similarly, research of perceptions of safety in private schools is narrow. Shakeel and DeAngelis (2018) hypothesize that the private schools' safety advantages that could be due to the fact that their less restrictive safety procedures could make students feel more comfortable and trustworthy. This literature review found that parents, students, and faculty often perceive charter and private schools as safe, or safer than traditional public schools. While maintaining less restrictive safety practices, charter and private schools can experience fewer safety problems than their district-run public school peers. There is scant literature on charter school safety, and most studies in this review pertain to particular regions or sub-groups of charter schools. Consequently, policymakers should not make broad extrapolations from the conclusions of this review. Additional research on charter and private school safety practices and outcomes nationwide would be welcome. In particular, more research on the specific practices leading to more safety in private schools and public charter schools is needed.

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