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# **Duševné zdravie a wellbeing virtuálnej generácie**

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Zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej  
vedeckej konferencie  
21.11.2018

Eva Gajdošová  
Marek Madro  
Marta Valihorová (Eds.)

Bratislava 2018

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Editori: prof. PhDr. Eva Gajdošová, PhD.  
PhDr. Marek Madro  
doc. PhDr. Marta Valihorová, PhD.

Recenzenti: doc. PhDr. Lada Kaliská, PhD.  
doc. PhDr. Blandína Šramová, PhD.

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# A COMMENT ON SCHOOL SAFETY AND MENTAL WELLNESS, INCLUDING COVITALITY<sup>1</sup>

## KOMENTÁR K BEZPEČIU A DUŠEVNÉMU ZDRAVIU V ŠKOLÁCH, ZAHŘŇAJÍC COVITALITY

Michael J. FURLONG

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5011-4565>  
International Center for School Based Youth Development  
University of California Santa Barbara, USA

mfurlong@ucsb.edu    [www.project-covitality.info](http://www.project-covitality.info)    [www.michaelfurlong.info/CSCSS/](http://www.michaelfurlong.info/CSCSS/)

**Abstract:** *Drawing upon an ongoing school mental health survey being conducted in California, this article examines associations between high school students' mental wellness, including covitality (as measured with the Social Emotional Health Survey–Secondary), and school safety perceptions and experiences. Student self-reports reveal a strong positive association between psychosocial wellness and feeling safe and secure at school. Proactive efforts by educators to foster students' thriving well-being could also have the benefit of improving school climate and safety.*

**Keywords:** *school safety, mental wellness, covitality, California, project-covitality, Social Emotional Health Survey–Secondary*

### Introduction

In the United States public awareness and concern about the linkages between school violence and mental health spikes after each school shooting. This pattern has repeated itself since the Columbine attack in 1999, when the Safe School Healthy Students Initiative was initially funded by the U.S. federal government. After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, there were calls to make “mental health part of the school safety solution.” President Obama proposed legislation to fund broad school safety efforts that included mental health services. With the school shootings at Parkland High School (Florida) and at Santa Fe High School (Texas) this past school year, the public dialog again has linked these acts of school violence with mental health concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> The California survey described in this article are supported in part by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant # R305A160157 to the University of California, Santa Barbara. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education.

Along with ongoing efforts to reduce school violence, it is important to consider the associations between a perpetrator’s mental health and these acts of mass violence. That being said, focusing primarily on these acts of violence limits our complete understanding of the negative effects that more common forms of school violence and victimization have on students’ mental health. It is useful to consider violence that occurs on school campuses as a broad term — one that encompasses physical acts, verbal insults, social rejection, and other forms of victimization.

Some have suggested that whether an act is experienced as being “violent” is not necessarily inherent to the nature of the act itself, but on the meaning it has for the victim. Drawing from this perspective, students’ judgment about how safe they feel at school has been used as an indicator of perceived dangers on the school campus. This safety risk perception can emerge out of direct physical victimization; vicariously, as in witnessing the victimization of others; and indirectly, as in being exposed to media and other reports of school violence. Uniquely in California, students and school staff have a constitutional right to attend schools that are safe, secure, and peaceful.

This right was first recognized in the 1982 Victim Bill of Rights... which was amended by Prop 9 in 2008: 28f(1): (1) Right to Safe Schools. All students and staff of public primary, elementary, junior high, and senior high schools, and community colleges, colleges, and universities have the inalienable right to attend campuses which are safe, secure and peaceful.

Accordingly, it is a constitutional rights matter in California that schools strive to create campus conditions that are secure (protected), peaceful (have limited conflicts), and safe (have low victimization). Hence, one important consideration is to be aware of students’ perceptions of school safety and consider the associations between these safety perceptions and wellbeing.

Having stated this, what is the association between school safety and mental health? Although it is logical to conclude that students’ school safety beliefs are linked with mental health indicators, there is surprisingly limited information about how students’ school violence victimization experiences are associated with indicators of emotional distress and positive, thriving wellbeing.

## **Exploring the association between school safety and mental wellness**

To provide a perspective on how students’ perceptions of school safety are associated with their complete mental health, I draw on an ongoing two-year survey of adolescent mental health being conducted in California. This survey offers access to unique information about students’ school safety/violence related perceptions, emotional distress experiences, and self-reported psychosocial wellbeing.

The data used in this section include the responses of students attending five geographically dispersed California high schools (Grades 9-12). The sample characteristics are as follows (largest subgroup shown): female (52.1%), White (40.8%), parent college graduate (38.8%), home language English (77.6%), and not eligible for the subsidized federal school lunch program (51.9%). Items included in this study’s

comprehensive questionnaire were drawn from the Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance Survey (Kann, McManus, Harris et al., 2018), The School Connectedness Scale (Furlong, O’Brennan, & You, 2011), the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (Keyes, 2006), the Social Emotional Distress Scale–Secondary (Dowdy et al., 2018), and the Brief Multidimensional Life Satisfaction Scale (Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003). See Project CoVitality for more information ([www.project-covitality.info](http://www.project-covitality.info))

*Table 1. Associations between California high school students’ perceptions of school safety and school connectedness, psychosocial distress, and psychosocial wellbeing.*

	How safe do you feel when you are at school?			
	Unsafe n = 484	Neutral n = 1,228	Safe n = 3,049	$\eta^2$
<b>Self-reported safety and mental wellness experiences</b>				
<b>Direct school violence</b>				
...been pushed, shoved, slapped, hit, or kicked by someone who wasn’t just kidding around (% yes) a	36.2%	21.2%	11.3%	.24
...been threatened with harm or injury? (% yes) a	21.9%	9.6%	4.7%	.22
<b>Psychosocial distress</b>				
...did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that you stopped doing some usual activities? b	55.0%	47.7%	29.2%	.19
...I had a hard time breathing because I was anxious. c	36.0%	27.7%	20.3%	.18
<b>School connectedness</b>				
I feel like I am part of this school (% agree/strongly agree)	19.4%	30.4%	65.7%	.51
I feel close to people at this school (% agree/strongly agree)	33.5%	46.2%	80.9%	.38
<b>Psychosocial wellness</b>				
I would describe my satisfaction with my school experience as: (% satisfied/very satisfied)	19.7%	24.3%	54.6%	.40
% with flourishing mental health d	27.3%	31.1%	54.6%	.28

a During the past 12 months, how many times on school property have you...

b During the past 12 months...

c in the past month...

d Based on responses to the 14 Mental Health Continuum-Short Form items (Keyes, 2006). Students with flourishing mental health experienced at least 1 of 3 affective well-being items almost every day or every day in the past month AND experienced 6 of 11 social and psychological well-being items almost every day or every day in the past month.

e Effect size indicator: small effect = .10–.30; moderate effect = .30–.50; large effect

>.50.

Table 1 categorizes students' responses to this question: "How safe do you feel when you are at school?" and shows their responses to illustrative school safety and wellness indicators. Students who reported feeling unsafe at school were significantly more likely to report being victimized: 3.2 times more likely to be physically pushed and 4.7 times more likely to be threatened with physical harm. Students who feel unsafe were also more likely to say that they experienced emotional distress (1.9 times more likely to experience a depressive symptom and 1.8 times more likely to experience an anxiety symptom). In comparison, students who feel safe were significantly more likely than students who feel unsafe to report a sense of positive connectedness to school: 3.4 times more likely to feel that they are a part of their school and 2.4 times more likely to feel close interpersonal bonds within the school community. Finally, students who feel safe were 2.0 times more likely than unsafe students to report having thriving mental health.

## **Covitality and students school safety perceptions**

The term covitality is used to describe the synergistic interaction of coexisting, interactive social and psychological strengths that are associated with mental wellness (Furlong et al., 2019). Studies have identified covitality as a robust predictor of positive subjective well-being, better psychological adjustment, and less depression, signifying the significant aggregate effects of social-psychological strengths on mental health. Drawing on the aforementioned comprehensive California school mental health survey, there is a unique opportunity to explore the association between high school students' global perceptions of school safety and their covitality social emotional health status.

Again, considering the question "How safe do you feel when you are at school?", Figure 1 shows the mean total covitality score by students' responses: very unsafe (n = 124, 2.8%), unsafe (n = 165, 3.7%), neutral (n = 1,390, 31.4%), safe (n = 2,065, 44.6%), very safe (n = 686, 15.5%). A comforting first observation is that more students (60.1%) report feeling safe than feeling unsafe (6.5%); however, a concerning finding is that nearly one-third of students (31.4%) expressed neutral opinions about school safety. A second observation is that students' school safety perceptions are significantly associated with their reported levels of positive, covitality strengths,  $F(4, 4425) = 250.08, p < .001; VU < U < N < S < VS$ ). This brief analysis adds to the covitality literature by establishing a link between students' psychosocial development and school safety experiences.

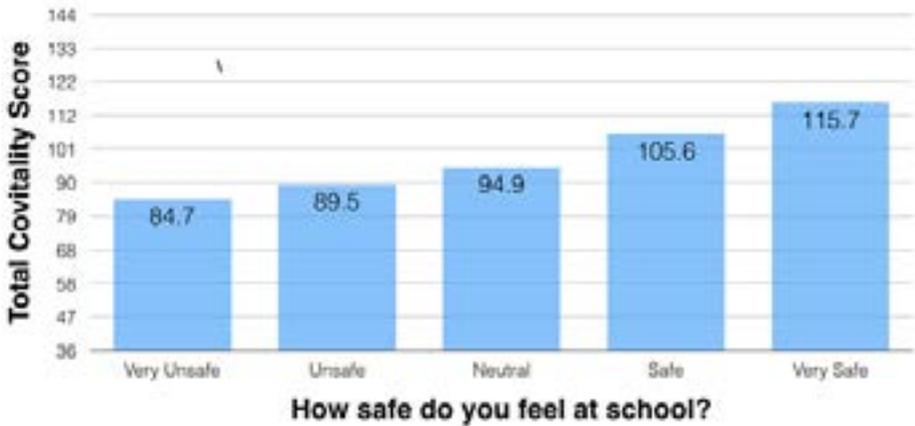


Figure 1. Mean total covitality score from the Social Emotional Health Survey–Secondary (SEHS-S) for California students in Grades 9-12 (N = 4,430) by school safety perceptions. (Note. The total covitality score range for the SEHS-S form used in this report is 36–144. A score of 108 corresponds to an average response of “pretty much like me” across all 36 items).

## Discussion

The information in this article examined the co-occurrence of students’ school violence and mental health experiences. I note some generalizations and cautions about these relations. An important pattern is that most students report feeling safe at school. Safe students are less likely to experience emotional distress and have positive psychosocial experiences. They report feeling positive affiliation with their schools and high well-being. For the majority of these high school students, schools are places where their positive psychosocial development is being fostered. Although these patterns are based on a building sample of California students, they demonstrate that a meaningful subgroup of students, (up to one-third) report having direct school violence experiences (e.g., physical bullying, fighting, and threats of personal harm). These victimized students are substantially more likely to report that they feel unsafe at school, experience the school context as being less supportive, and to more frequently experience emotional distress. Only about one-third of these students reported flourishing psychosocial well-being because they were less likely to feel positive affect, experienced positive self-perceptions less often, and infrequently had feelings that society in general was moving in a positive direction. When considering school safety, it is essential to examine how extreme violent acts (e.g., school assaults and shootings) and more common forms of violence (e.g., bullying) affect student mental health.

## Closing comments

Based on the information presented in this brief article, further exploration of the com-

mon factors that foster students' flourishing psychosocial development and school safety is warranted. The information presented in this report does not provide insights about developmental or causal relations between school safety and mental wellness. Nonetheless, the observations made in this article do suggest that when students' life experiences lead them to conclude that their lives are characterized by high levels of self-efficacy, positive social connections, emotional regulation, gratitude, and optimism, among other positive personal assets, they are more likely to perceive their school as being safe and supportive.

The following concluding observations are provided:

1. Most California students feel safe at school and most report having flourishing wellbeing.
2. Feeling safe at school is not exclusively linked to students' direct victimization experiences.
3. Mental health is associated with students' perceptions of school safety, but other factors contribute to students' flourishing wellbeing and coping with psychosocial challenges.
4. There is a need to focus on the linkages between school violence and mental health, but this focus alone will underidentify and underserve students' mental wellness needs.
5. Schools and communities that plan for and provide comprehensive services that foster students' thriving psychosocial development will be more likely to concurrently create safe, secure, and peaceful schools.

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Prof. M.J. Furlong je členom Americkej psychologickej asociácie, Americkej asociácie edukačného výskumu a Spoločnosti školskej psychológie. V súčasnosti pracuje na Gewirtz Graduate School of Education, California University Santa Barbara, California, USA. Je čelným predstaviteľom psychológov, ktorý sa v súčasnosti venujú problematike mentálneho zdravia a sociálno-emocionálneho zdravia žiakov základných a stredných škôl a študentov vysokých škôl a pripravujú psychodiagnostické nástroje na skúmanie silných stránok osobnosti adolescentov a mladých dospelých a ich rizikových faktorov. Prof. Furlong úzko spolupracuje s Fakultou psychológie PEVŠ pri výskumoch sociálno-emocionálneho zdravia mladých ľudí na Slovensku.