



# **School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) 2022**

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Supporting Statement Part C

Item Justification

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## **Section C. Item Justification**

### **C1. Item Description and Justification: 2021–22 SSOCS**

At multiple points in the history of the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), the survey items have been examined for the quality of both their content and data, and, when necessary, the questionnaire has been adjusted. In order to maintain consistent benchmarks over time, few changes have been made to the questionnaire over the most recent survey iterations. For SSOCS:2022, some new items are proposed to capture how schools have adjusted their practices to maintain a safe environment in response to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) that began in the 2019–20 school year. These draft items are undergoing cognitive testing in winter and spring 2021. Slight revisions may be made to the proposed items based on cognitive testing results.

Presented below is a complete description of the sections and the corresponding items in the SSOCS:2022 questionnaire (see Appendix B for the questionnaire). The SSOCS:2022 questionnaire consists of the following sections:

- School practices and programs;
- Parent and community involvement at school;
- School security staff;
- School mental health services;
- Staff training and practices;
- Limitations on crime prevention;
- Frequency of crime and violence at school;
- Incidents;
- Disciplinary problems and actions; and
- School characteristics: 2021–22 school year.

#### **1.1 School Practices and Programs**

This section collects data on current school policies and programs relating to crime and practices to maintain a safe environment. These data are important in helping schools know where they stand in relation to other schools, and in helping policymakers know what actions are already being taken in schools and what actions schools might be encouraged to take in the future. These data can also benefit researchers interested in evaluating the success of certain school policies. Although SSOCS is not designed as an evaluation, the presence of school policies can be correlated with the rates of crime provided elsewhere in the questionnaire, with appropriate controls for school characteristics.

Question 1 asks specifically about the various school policies and practices that are in place, including those that restrict access to school grounds, monitor student behavior to prevent crime, impact the school's ability to recognize an outsider, and enable communication in the event of a school-wide emergency. These policies and practices are important because they influence the control that administrators have over the school environment as well as the potential for students to bring weapons or drugs onto school grounds. Such actions can directly affect crime because students may be more reluctant to engage in inappropriate activities for fear of being caught. The school climate may also be affected because students may feel more secure knowing that violators of school policies are likely to be caught.

Questions 2 and 3 ask about the existence of written plans for dealing with various crisis

scenarios, and whether schools drill students on the use of specific emergency procedures. When emergencies occur, there may not be time or an appropriate environment for making critical decisions, and key school leaders may not be immediately available to provide guidance. Thus, having a written plan for crises and drilling students on emergency procedures is important in preparing schools to deal with crises effectively.

Question 4 asks specifically whether schools have a formal plan in place during the current school year (2021–22) to prepare for and respond to multi-country or worldwide pandemic diseases like the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflects schools' response to the coronavirus pandemic and preparedness for future global health crises. A formal plan helps to mitigate the spread of disease and the disruption of school operations and student learning by being proactive in planning for disaster rather than reacting after it occurs.

Question 5 asks whether schools had a formal plan in place to respond to multi-country or worldwide pandemic diseases before the coronavirus pandemic began in the 2019–20 school year. This reflects schools' preparedness to respond to a pandemic disease prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 and can be used as a reference point for comparing the prevalence of school plans for pandemic diseases before and after the coronavirus pandemic.

Question 6 asks about the implementation of various practices and safety measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These practices are based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines that are designed to mitigate the viral transmission of COVID-19 in a school setting.

Question 7 asks if school emergency readiness practices like fire drills and active shooter drills have been modified in response to CDC safety guidelines and what specific modifications have been made. These emergency readiness practices are important in preparing students and teachers for disasters but require special considerations in order to practice them while adhering to CDC guidelines for protecting the health and safety of students and staff and slowing the spread of COVID-19.

Question 8 asks if a site assessment has been conducted to evaluate schools' preparedness to operate according to CDC safety guidelines for operating schools during COVID-19. A site assessment evaluates the safety, accessibility, and emergency preparedness of the school's buildings and grounds. Specific CDC guidelines covered by a site assessment may include ensuring that there is adequate room to maintain social distancing between students and using appropriate air filtration systems. These assessments can help schools identify health and safety threats and risks, informing the understanding of issues and resources that may need to be addressed in the development or updating of pandemic disease response plans.

Question 9 asks about various activities schools have in place that may directly or indirectly prevent or reduce violence. The presence of such activities is a sign that schools are being proactive by seeking to prevent violence before it occurs rather than reacting to it.

Question 10 asks whether schools have a threat assessment team. Threat assessment teams are an emerging practice in schools to identify and interrupt students who may be on a path to violent behavior.

Question 11 asks about the presence of recognized student groups that promote inclusiveness and acceptance in schools. The presence of such groups is important in creating a climate in which students are respectful of peers from all backgrounds and may help to reduce conflict and violence.

### **1.2 Parent and Community Involvement at School**

This section asks about the involvement of parents and community groups in schools. Parent and community involvement in schools can affect the school culture and may impact the level of crime in a school.

Question 12 asks about policies or practices that schools have implemented to involve parents in school procedures.

Question 13 asks if specific community organizations are involved in promoting a safe school environment to determine the extent to which the school involves outside groups.

### **1.3 School Security Staff**

Questions 14 through 20 ask about the use and activities of sworn law enforcement officers (including School Resource Officers) on school grounds and at school events.

Question 21 asks about the presence of other security personnel who are not sworn law enforcement officers. In addition to directly affecting school crime, the use of security staff can also affect the school environment. Security staff may help prevent illegal actions, reduce the amount of crime, and contribute to feelings of security or freedom on school grounds. Thus, the times that law enforcement personnel are present, their visibility, their roles and responsibilities, and their carrying of weapons are all important.

### **1.4 School Mental Health Services**

Questions 22 and 23 ask whether diagnostic mental health assessments were provided to students by a licensed mental health professional and whether these diagnostic assessments were provided at school or outside of school (school-employed or contracted mental health professionals may provide diagnostic assessment services in either or both locations). Assessing the types of mental health services provided by schools as well as the location of these services demonstrates how well-equipped schools are to deal with students who have mental disorders. Schools' ability to attend to students who have mental health disorders may influence the frequency and severity of delinquency and behavioral problems within the school.

Questions 24 and 25 ask whether treatment for mental health disorders was provided to students by a licensed mental health professional and whether treatment was provided at school or outside of school (school-employed or contracted mental health professionals may provide treatment in either or both locations).

Question 26 asks for principals' perceptions of the factors that limit their schools' efforts to provide mental health services to students. The question asks about factors such as inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals, inadequate funding, concerns about parents' reactions, and the legal responsibilities of the school. Schools that face issues relating to inadequate resources or support may have limited effectiveness in providing mental health services to students. Schools' financial obligation to pay for mental health services may also make them reluctant to identify students who require these services.

### **1.5 Staff Training and Practices**

Question 27 asks whether schools or districts provide training for classroom teachers or aides on topics such as classroom management; school-wide policies and practices related to violence, bullying, and cyberbullying; alcohol and/or drug use; and safety procedures. Other types of training include recognizing potentially violent students; recognizing signs of suicidal tendencies; recognizing signs of substance abuse; intervention and referral strategies for students who display signs of mental health disorders; recognizing physical, social, and verbal bullying; positive behavioral intervention strategies; and crisis prevention and intervention. Schools can now obtain early warning signs to identify potentially violent students, and their use of such profiles may affect both general levels of discipline and the potential for crises. The type of training provided to teachers is important because teachers collectively spend the most time with students and observe them closely. Moreover, there is evidence in recent research that a substantial discrepancy exists in the percentage of schools that have these types of policies and the percentage of teachers that are trained in them. Collecting data on teacher training will inform efforts to combat violence and discipline problems in schools.

Question 28 asks if there are any school staff, other than sworn law enforcement or other security officers, who legally carry a firearm on school property. While many school districts and states have policies that prohibit carrying firearms on school property, some state and district policies allow school staff to legally carry (concealed) firearms at school. While not all policies require those who carry a firearm on campus to divulge that information, principals may be aware of some instances in which staff members have brought firearms on school property. The presence of firearms in schools may be an indicator of the school climate.

### **1.6 Limitations on Crime Prevention**

This section asks for principals' perceptions of the factors that limit their schools' efforts to reduce or prevent crime.

Question 29 asks about factors such as lack of adequate training for teachers, lack of support from parents or teachers, and inadequate funding. Although principals are not trained evaluators, they are the people who are the most knowledgeable about the situations at their schools and whether their own actions have been constrained by the factors listed. Schools that face issues relating to inadequate resources or support may have limited effectiveness in responding to disciplinary issues and reducing or preventing crime. Identifying principals' perceptions of the factors that limit their ability to prevent crime in school can inform efforts to minimize obstructions to schools' crime prevention measures.

### **1.7 Incidents**

The questions in this section ask about the frequency and types of crime and disruptions at school (other than violent deaths).

Question 30 specifically asks principals to provide counts of the number of recorded incidents that occurred at school and the number of incidents that were reported to the police or other law enforcement. This question will assist in identifying which types of crimes in schools are underreported to the police and will provide justification for further investigation.

Questions 31 and 32 ask about the number of hate crimes and the biases that may have motivated these hate crimes.

Question 33 asks whether there were any incidents of sexual misconduct between school staff

members and students.

Question 34 asks about the number of arrests that have occurred at school. The data gained from this section can be used directly as an indicator of the degree of safety in U.S. public schools and indirectly to compare schools in terms of the number of problems they face.

### **1.8 Disciplinary Problems and Actions**

This section asks about the degree to which schools face various disciplinary problems and how schools respond to them. The data gathered in questions 35 and 36 can help to provide an overall measure of the types of problems schools encounter on a regular basis. There is evidence that schools' ability to control crime is affected by their control of lesser violations, and that, when lesser violations are controlled, students do not progress to more serious disciplinary problems. The data gathered in this section will be helpful in confirming or denying the importance of schools' control of lesser violations and provide another measure of the disciplinary situation in U.S. schools. The data may also be helpful in multivariate models of school crime by providing a way of grouping schools that are similar in their general disciplinary situation but different in their school policies or programs.

Question 35 asks principals to report, to the best of their knowledge, how often certain disciplinary problems occur at school. Problems of interest include student racial/ethnic tensions; bullying; sexual harassment; harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or disability; widespread disorder in classrooms; student disrespect of teachers; and gang activities. This question provides a general measure of the degree to which there are disciplinary problems at each school.

Question 36 asks about the frequency of cyberbullying (including at and away from school), providing a general measure of the degree to which cyberbullying is an issue for students.

Question 37 asks what kinds of disciplinary actions were available to each school and whether each action was actually used during the school year. This item is not intended to be comprehensive; instead, it focuses on some of the most important disciplinary strategies. These data will help policymakers to know what options and what constraints principals face. For example, if an action is allowed in principle but not used in practice, then policymakers would need to act in a different way than if the action is not allowed.

Question 38 asks about the number of various types of offenses committed by students and the resulting disciplinary actions taken by schools and question 39 asks how many students were removed or transferred from school for disciplinary reasons. These items provide valuable information about how school policies are actually implemented (rather than simply what policies are in place), with a particular emphasis on how many different kinds of actions are taken with regard to a particular offense as well as how many times no actions are taken.

### **1.9 School Characteristics: 2021–22 School Year**

This section asks for a variety of information about the characteristics of the schools responding to the survey. The information provided in this section is necessary to be able to understand the degree to which different schools face different situations. For example, one school might have highly effective programs and policies, yet still have high crime rates due to the high crime rates in the area where the school is located. Another school might appear to have effective policies based on its crime rates but actually have higher crime rates than similar schools.

Question 40 asks for the school type. Schools that target particular groups of students (such as magnet schools) have more control over who is in the student body and may have more motivated students because the students have chosen a particular program. Charter schools have more freedom than regular schools in their school policies, may have more control over who is admitted into the student body, and may have more motivated students because the students chose to attend the school.

Question 41 asks for the specific grades offered in the school.

Question 42 asks for the start and end dates for the 2021–22 school year.

Question 43 asks for the school’s total enrollment.

Question 44 asks for the number of transfers. When students transfer after the school year has started, schools have less control over whether and how the students are assimilated into the school. These students are likely to have less attachment to the school as well as to the other students, thus increasing the risk of disciplinary problems.

Question 45 asks for the school’s average daily attendance. This is a measure of truancy and thus a measure of the level of disciplinary problems at the school. It also is a measure of the academic environment.

Question 46 asks for the number of classroom changes made in a typical day. This is important because it affects schools’ ability to control the student environment. When students are in hallways, there are more opportunities for problems. Also, a school with fewer classroom changes is likely to be more personal and to have closer relationships between the students and teachers.

Question 47 requests information on the school’s student population, including the percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches (a measure of poverty), are English language learners (a measure of the cultural environment), are in special education (a measure of the academic environment), and are male (most crimes are committed by males, so the percentage who are male can affect the overall crime rate).

Question 48 addresses various levels of student academic proficiency and interest, which are factors that have been shown to be associated with crime rates.

Questions 49 and 50 ask about the crime levels in the neighborhoods where students live and in the area where the school is located. This is an important distinction, since some students may travel a great distance to their school, and their home community may have a significantly different level of crime than their school community.

## C2. Changes to the Questionnaire and Rationale: SSOCS:2022

No items have been deleted or modified between the SSOCS:2020 and SSOCS:2022 questionnaires, in order to preserve trend data for the final SSOCS administration. The following section details items added to the SSOCS:2022 questionnaire. Based on the new circumstances presented by the coronavirus pandemic, these new items are proposed to gather information on how schools have adjusted their practices to maintain a safe environment in response to COVID-19.

The result is the proposed instrument for the SSOCS:2022 survey administration, which is located in appendix B.

## 2.1 Changes to Definitions

Six definitions have been added in order to clarify the terms used in new survey items related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on school safety practices.

**Cohorting** – A formal definition has been provided aligning with the language used by the CDC in the agency’s guiding principles and mitigation strategies for operating K–12 schools during COVID-19.

**Contact tracing** – A formal definition has been provided aligning with the language used by the CDC in the agency’s guidance for case investigation and contract tracing in K–12 schools during COVID-19.

**Distance learning** – A formal definition has been provided aligning with the language used by the Department of Education.

**Hybrid learning model** – A formal definition has been provided aligning with the language used by the CDC in the agency’s guiding principles and mitigation strategies for operating K–12 schools during COVID-19.

**Site assessment** – A formal definition for site assessment has been provided aligning with the language used by the Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Federal Emergency Management Agency in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*.

**Trauma** – A formal definition has been provided aligning with the language used by the Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

## 2.2 Item Additions and Rationale

Six items have been added in order to capture information specific to schools’ planning and practices for responding to COVID-19.

**Item 4.** This item has been added to identify the existence of a formal plan to respond to pandemic diseases such as the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). This gathers information on how many schools are following established processes and guidelines to ensure the continuation of schooling and protect student and staff health during the current pandemic.

**Item 5.** This item has been added to identify the existence of a formal plan to respond to pandemic diseases before the outbreak of COVID-19. This information measures how prevalent it was for schools to include pandemic diseases in their emergency planning before COVID-19 and could indicate the level of schools’ preparedness to respond to the early stages of the current pandemic. It can also be used as a reference point compared with item 4 to indicate how many schools have developed a new plan for pandemic diseases since COVID-19 began.

**Item 6.** This item has been added to collect information on the practices that schools have implemented to protect the health and safety of students and staff and slow the spread of COVID-19. This item is not intended to be comprehensive; instead, it focuses on some of the most important guiding principles and mitigation strategies for operating K–12 schools during COVID-19, as set by the CDC.

**Item 7.** This item has been added to gather information on whether schools have made modifications to emergency readiness practices (such as drills) to adhere to strategies for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and the specific ways in which these emergency readiness practices were modified.

**Item 8.** This item has been added to ask if schools have conducted site assessments to measure the school safety specifically in regard to CDC guidelines for COVID-19. Adequate assessment of health and safety risks can assist schools in designing and modifying plans to respond to pandemic diseases, keep students and staff safe, and ensure a continuation of learning.