Empirical Article

Journal of Adolescent Research
1–31

DOI: 10.1177/07435584231164643
journals.sagepub.com/home/jar
SAGE

Colombian Adolescents' Perceptions of Violence and Opportunities for Safe Spaces Across Community Settings

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Abstract

During adolescence, access to safe environments is critical for healthy development. This study analyzed adolescents' perceptions of safety in personal and public spaces in the semi-rural community of Santa Ana, Colombia on the Island of Barú (95.8% of inhabitants live in poverty). We used thematic analysis to explore adolescents' experiences and reflections to identify the factors influencing their perception of safety across different community spaces. Four gender-segregated focus group discussions were held with 40 adolescents (20 male and 20 female) from ages 13 to 17 ($M = 14.4$, $SD = 1.2$). Most of them self-identified as Black (86%). The more recurrent spaces in the adolescents' conversations were the streets, the school, the local sports field, individual homes, and commercial sound system parties known as "Picos." Adolescents perceived the school as the

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safest space, while the "Picos" were the most unsafe. The other spaces were considered mixed, meaning that their perceived safety shifts and depends on the presence of certain factors. These factors were risky behaviors, group affiliation, designated authority roles and the relevance of time. The authors discuss the importance of addressing the factors that inform adolescents' safety perception, particularly within low resource settings cross-culturally.

Keywords
adolescence, community/neighborhood, gender, Latin America (includes Central and South America), violence, organized activities (after-school, extracurricular)

The United Nations (UN) has called for prioritizing safe and sustainable spaces for youth (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). Referred to as Sustainable Development Goal 11, this effort highlights a global need for young people to have safe spaces where they can come together, socialize, participate in decision-making, and freely express themselves. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2014) similarly asserts education, community, and home settings should be places of safety and refuge, free from stigma, maltreatment, and violence for adolescents. Safe spaces are those physical spaces where adolescents can come together, socialize, and participate in the community life without being systematically exposed to violence, threats, and discrimination.

It is critical to examine safe spaces for adolescents given the short-and long-term negative outcomes (e.g., violence exposure, stress, anxiety, depression) associated with living in communities experiencing economic, sociocultural, and political upheavals (e.g., Borges et al., 2019; Cócola-Gant, 2018; Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Sánchez-Ledesma et al., 2020). Similarly, private sphere conflict can increase adolescents' risk for negative outcomes (e.g., depression symptoms, aggression) if adolescents are exposed to violence from family members (Browne et al., 2021; Cuartas et al., 2019; Sargent et al., 2020). Considering the global importance of safe spaces, this study aimed to identify the social and cultural factors that impact adolescents' perceptions of safety in the various spaces they inhabit. It examined what specific spaces were perceived as safe or unsafe in the community. Lastly, due to the difference in the exposure to violence for adolescent boys compared to adolescent girls, particular attention was accorded to the intersection of gender and adolescent development.

Socio-Historical-Political Climate and Perceived Risk and Safety

As noted in recent studies, socio-historical dynamics impact residents' perceptions of community safety. For example, tourism gentrification in cities and in rural and coastal areas around the world has been found to play a part in the decline of social networks, familial connectivity, and loss of identity among community members (Cócola-Gant, 2018; Sánchez-Ledesma et al., 2020). Further, the growth of underground economies (e.g., illegal substance distribution, sex trafficking) has been attributed, in part, to the introduction of tourism and mass immigration (Borges et al., 2019; Devine & Ojeda, 2017; Sánchez-Ledesma et al., 2020). These contribute to community instability and violence, shaping insecurity perceptions. The community studied provides an example. On the surface, the drug trafficking dynamic in Santa Ana differs from stereotypical drug syndicates that focus on exportation. The most lucrative drug dealing is linked to tourism, particularly in Playa Blanca (a touristic beach in the area), where the adolescents work and spend time. This dynamic reflects, in part, the more recent trend toward Colombian drug trafficking organizations occurring at smaller community levels (Bagley, 2013). Due to the community level dynamic of this phenomena in the region, the analysis of its impact on adolescents' engagement or exposure to violence is crucial.

Socio-Economic and Historical Context of the Community

Santa Ana is a village on Barú Island. Most residents are descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped from the Colombian mainland. In the 16th century, they established small villages called "*palenques*," including the village of Santa Ana (Castillo, 2013). Most Santaneros (native residents of Santa Ana) trace their familial lineage to this first group of settlers on the island. Even today, more than 90% of the population self-identified as Black (Pizarro, 2008). The now semi-rural community of Santa Ana had approximately 4,000 habitants in 2008 and 5,000 in 2018 (Montes et al., 2022; Pizarro, 2008), representing an annual population increase of 2.5% for the 2008 to 2018 period. The primary income sources are informal touristic-related activities (Cartagena Cómo Vámos, 2018). This region suffers from lower-quality institutional support compared to most communities adjacent to the district. For example, Santa Ana does not have a sewer system, while more than 80% of the urban population of nearby Cartagena has one (Cartagena Cómo Vámos, 2018). In 2018, 95.8% of residents of Santa Ana lived in poverty and 54.6% were in extreme poverty (Cartagena Cómo Vámos, 2018; Roche & Santos, 2012).

After being isolated from the economic and social dynamics of nearby tourist hubs, in the 1990s the island was envisioned as a tourist destination and later as a port industry region. The importance given to these visions is evident in the road and the bridge built in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The bridge transformed the social dynamics by permitting access to the island without the restriction of time or money. Before the bridge was built, a ferry charged and transported the people to the island and worked until 7 pm. After that time, it was almost impossible to cross or leave the island. The bridge transformed the island from a rural and isolated community to an urban-influenced one, arguably redefining the community as semi-rural. Unfortunately, this emerging economy has failed to serve and include—culturally and economically—the native communities of the island (Castillo, 2013). Nevertheless, various NGOs have focused their efforts on health, poverty reduction, services for the elderly, and education (Caracterización de Dinámicas comunitarias II Santa Ana, Isla de Barú, 2014).

Environment's Influence on Adolescent Wellbeing

It is crucial to examine the experiences of Santa Ana's adolescents as they are at a sensitive, formative stage of psychological and social development. At this stage of the lifespan, individuals rely heavily on opportunities to access environments that make positive health practices the easiest choice (Banspach et al., 2016; DiClemente et al., 2018; Scorgie et al., 2017). Having access to safe spaces for negotiating the intersecting physical, emotional, and social changes (e.g., poverty, abuse, or violence) decreases adolescents' vulnerability to mental health problems (Banspach et al., 2016; DiClemente et al., 2018; Fite et al., 2019). For example, studies of diverse populations have consistently found that when adolescents perceive their social spaces as safe, there is an associated increase in their social competence and a decrease in externalizing behavioral problems (Donenberg et al., 2020; Fite et al., 2019; Scorgie et al., 2017). Thus, it is important to focus on perceived safety in addition to actual victimization.

Unfortunately, these adolescent vulnerabilities are common, particularly in Latin America, rural areas, and marginalized populations. In Latin America, the homicide rate is three times the global average, and interpersonal violence accounts for nearly a third of all adolescent male deaths (Muggah & Aguirre, 2018; WHO, 2014). Similarly, 61% of adult women in Colombia report that boys and girls in their households are disciplined through beating, slapping, spanking, or hitting (Bott et al., 2019). In the city of Cartagena (the nearest to Santa Ana), Ayala-García and Meisel-Roca (2016) found a high correlation between homicide and neighborhoods' Unsatisfied Basic Needs

(UBN), showing the disproportionate exposure to violence of children living in impoverished communities. Even though Colombia is the Latin American country with the most citizen security interventions between 1998 and 2015 (Muggah & Aguirre, 2018), the region of Barú has not been a beneficiary of those initiatives. A study conducted with 300 adolescents in Bogotá, Colombia, by Cuartas and Roy (2019) showed that experiences with violence, such as indirect exposure to local homicides, increases the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. In that study, adolescents living in multidimensionally poor households exhibited an even higher risk for symptoms of PTSD.

Ecological Guiding Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides an effective framework for identifying the environments affecting every facet of adolescents' lives. It articulates how multilevel community and socio-historical factors influence individuals' experiences across five systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The overarching system, the chronosystem, encompasses the historical time and the important events occurring throughout an individual's lifetime. This dimension facilitates analyzing how those events and epochs influence the development of the organism (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, in Santa Ana, the construction of a bridge in 2014 affected the environment in which those adolescents live. The second broadest system is the macrosystem, which constitutes the cultural elements of an individual's context. In the case of Santa Ana's youth this includes legitimizing violence to solve conflicts that permeate Colombian culture (Chaux et al., 2012). Next, the exosystem comprises the social structures in the setting in which a person is embedded, such as neighborhoods, government agencies and media. The second closest level to the individual is the mesosystem, incorporating the multidirectional interactions that occur between the individual and the multiple microsystems to which they belong (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). For example, in the case of at-risk adolescents in Colombia, this level captures the interaction between school staff and parents of the adolescents. Finally, the microsystem, which involves family, teachers, and the peer networks, is the most direct level to the individual. Unfortunately, in Santa Ana, 30% of the population reported seeing domestic violence as prevalent in the community (Pizarro, 2008).

Individual Characteristics: Gender

Those systems that influence the developing organism have differential impacts in relation to gender. Research has shown differing expectations

about violence perpetration and appropriate responses to victimization according to gender (e.g., Tovar-Restrepo & Irazábal, 2014; Walsh & Menjívar, 2016). For example, adolescent males are affected by gender role expectations, which require them to act tough and dominate. When adolescent boys fail to live up to their expectations of masculinity, the risk of engaging in violent acts increases (Reidy et al., 2015). Thus, the current study looked at gender differences in adolescents' experiences with violence and perceptions of (in)security in Santa Ana, as well as their social roles and culture through an ecological framework.

The Current Study

Despite the burgeoning body of research exploring safe spaces across global settings (Fetner et al., 2012; Kaminer et al., 2013; Peters, 2003), few specifically focus on adolescents' perceptions of these (e.g., Browne et al., 2021). Further, most examine urban experiences (DaViera & Roy, 2020; Dill & Ozer, 2016; Scorgie et al., 2017), ignoring the unique factors that occur in rural and semi-rural communities experiencing gentrification and other significant community changes. Thus, the current study examines the perceptions of safe spaces for adolescents in a semi-rural community experiencing significant socio-cultural changes. In contrast to quantifying acts of violence, which is mostly done by participants self-reporting on a survey such as the Screen for Adolescent Violence Exposure (SAVE) (Self-Brown et al., 2004), in this study, we aimed to capture adolescents' perceptions of safety with a qualitative method. This method is relevant in communities where rigorous data about violence is scarce.

Specifically, this study first sought to identify the social and cultural factors that impacted adolescents' perceptions of safety in the various spaces they inhabit. Second, it explored what specific spaces were perceived as safe or unsafe. Finally, due to the difference in the exposure to violence for adolescent boys compared to adolescent girls, particular attention was accorded to the intersection of gender and adolescent development. The overarching questions were: (1) what social and cultural factors do adolescents perceive as influencing their ability to feel safe from violence victimization, and (2) what spaces are perceived as safe and unsafe? (3) how are the experiences with violence different regarding gender?

Methods

The study presented here is part of a project (IsBaru) funded by the Global Health Equity Scholars Program (NIH FIC D43TW010540 Global Health

Equity Scholars). The IsBaru project examines the interplay between social networks, mental health, violence, and risk-taking behaviors among adolescents living in Santa Ana. These issues reflect the research priorities identified by community members of Santa Ana who participated in three open forums facilitated by our local partner Amor por Barú (APB) in 2017. We utilized focus group discussions (FGDs) as they are appropriate methods to address the issue of violence in ways that can encourage youth to present their voices in a group setting (Poso et al., 2008).

Participants

In 2019, adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 were recruited from the only local public school in the community. Four weeks after participating in a survey conducted by the IsBaru project, the first adolescents expressing interest in the FGD were selected after age and gender stratification. Four focus groups were deemed appropriate for coding saturation (Hennink et al., 2019). The selection aimed to obtain an even number of females ($N=20$) and males ($N=20$), as well as even numbers in each age group (20 early adolescents and 20 late adolescents). Four gender-segregated FGDs were conducted with 20 adolescent boys ($M=14.5$, $SD=1.24$) and 20 adolescent girls ($M=14.4$, $SD=1.17$). The majority identified as Black (86%) and had lived in the community for at least 85% of their lives.

FGDs Procedure

Before attending an FGD, participants provided written parental consent and written assent. The FGDs were held in a private space at a local NGO in the community. Participants were reminded of the importance of confidentiality before and at the end of each FGD. Protocols were in place to protect adolescents who may share experiences or concerns related to their safety or potential harm (Mateus et al., 2019). For example, the school counseling team and a local licensed psychologist were available before and after all sessions. Also, given the sensitive nature of the topic and prior research that identified differing gendered experiences with violence, the FGDs were segregated by gender (Tovar-Restrepo & Irazábal, 2014; Walsh & Menjívar, 2016). The research team and community partners jointly worked on the FGD protocol to integrate local linguistic norms and age-appropriate language into the process. The questions developed by the research team were shared with the school staff and their feedback were incorporated (See Appendix A for the FGD protocol). All procedures were approved by Institutional Review Boards

(IRB) of Florida International University in the United States and Universidad de los Andes in Colombia.

All FGDs were conducted in Spanish, averaging 2 hr each (including a break). FGD participants received a local gift deemed appropriate by our local partners and the IRBs to compensate them for their time. Two local researchers transcribed the FGDs audio recordings verbatim in the original language. The first three authors conducted a final transcript check.

Data Analysis

The authors employed codebook thematic analysis as it aims to determine, analyze, and report patterns that occur in the data that can be organized logically following a codebook structure. It allows a balance in the utilization of theory to guide the analysis while capturing the meaning and experiences of the participants (Braun et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2015). Following an initial inductive thematic analysis procedure, researchers first read the transcripts to get a sense of the content. They then discussed the preliminary patterns relevant to code and later captured them in the initial codebook. Subsequently, the first three authors coded the transcripts individually based on the codebook and using MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2021). The coders identified the different themes using a social constructivism interpretative framework (Creswell & Poth, 2016) and an Ecological Systems Theory approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). The themes reflecting participants' perceptions of safety were based on various levels of analysis (e.g., chronosystem, macrosystem, microsystem) and across different physical spaces.

As suggested by the codebook thematic analysis approach, authors met several times to discuss their results and reached a consensus to resolve any discrepancies through discussion. Also, recurring codes were analyzed according to gender and the frequencies of the different codes were compared by gender. For example, this process highlighted that boys mentioned the police only five times while girls mentioned the police 75 times. Also, the authors analyzed participants' references to gender norms and generalizations (such as "women are weak").

Positionality and Validity

To ensure trustworthiness, three coders participated in the coding process. All of them were Spanish speakers and had received training in qualitative methods. The first author was the leader of the local partner (APB) at the time of the data collection and had more than 15 years of experience working with youth in this context. He had expert knowledge of this community's

language, cultural meanings, and linguistic variations. The second author was the FGD interviewer. She is a native of the Caribbean region of Colombia and thus was familiar with the linguistic variations and cultural nuances of this context. She designed the FGD protocol and had previous experience conducting qualitative work. She also had a prolonged engagement in the field (more than 9 months). Similarly, the third author has expertise in Latin American culture and violence. The authors assumed that capturing the adolescents' perspective was enough to understand the community's dynamics of (in)security. This approach may bias the results by emphasizing the adolescents' experiences and not capturing others' perspectives, such as the ones of police officers or parents.

Results

The authors used three levels to describe the themes for clarity and depth as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). They identified two overarching themes (which are core concepts, like an umbrella) with each encompassing various patterns. In this study, the two overarching themes are (1) factors affecting safety and (2) adolescents' spaces. Under the first, the authors identified four patterns: risky behaviors, group affiliation, designated authority roles and the importance of time. Under the second, the authors identified three patterns: safe spaces, mixed safe spaces, and unsafe spaces. For the complete hierarchical structure of the overarching themes, themes and subthemes see Figure 1.

Factors Affecting Safety

Specific factors emerged as salient for determining the degree to which a space was perceived as safe. Behaviors associated with or known regularly to occur in specific locations influenced participants' perceptions of safety. Additionally, specific social dynamics and historical realities influenced their perceptions. Each theme has two sub-elements. Risky behaviors included violence, and harmful substances/drugs. Group affiliation had sub-elements of youth groups and Santanero versus others. Designated authority roles contained police and school staff, and importance of time contained past and calendar time sub-theme.

Risky Behaviors. The most salient theme informing adolescents perceptions of safety were the presence of violence and substance use, which we identified as risky behaviors. Although discussed as separate issues, they were

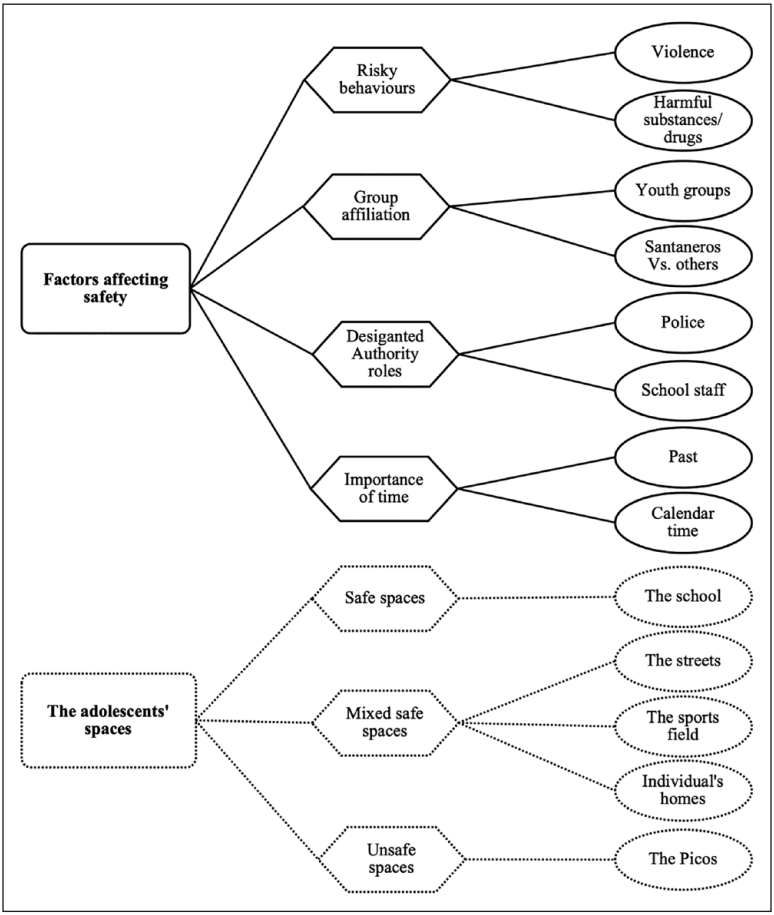

Figure 1. Overarching themes, themes, and sub-themes.

intertwined, as the adolescents described substance use as an antecedent of violence.

Violence. Spaces with frequent violence were more likely to be perceived as unsafe. Even during moments of calm, these participants spoke about feelings of dread and anticipatory fear about what could happen in these settings. The most common type of violence reported was physical. Although boys and girls both discussed how common physical violence was in public spaces, there were gendered differences in perceptions of violence. Whereas

boys described having to defend themselves against violent adult men (e.g., those initiating confrontations or carrying weapons), girls noted being able to run or avoid the physical confrontation. One adolescent boy described how in a confrontation "when the man realized that it was a woman, [he] did not do anything to her." Also, adolescent girls were more likely to expressly state that both adult men and adolescent male delinquents were the perpetrators of violence. Boys, however, did not discuss violence in terms of perpetration but rather masculinity expectations. One adolescent boy described how these masculinity expectations exposed him to violence:

> Around my house. . .. He came in and stabbed [me], he almost breaks. . . he slides [behind the door] . . . [The adolescent said]: "Go out I do not want problems" and [the intruder replied]: "I am not going anywhere, if you like we can fight." I did. . . I punched him.

Related to their discussions about general physical violence were participants' descriptions of the specific acts of robberies and murders. These extreme violent acts were described as resulting from the belief that violence was an appropriate way to resolve serious conflicts or seek justifiable revenge. Several adolescents reported being victims of robberies. As one adolescent boy explained, "If they do not know you and you are with your phone, they [drug addicts] rob it and run out of there."

Physical and verbal violence between familial members were especially salient for girls, who spoke frequently about domestic violence and corporal punishment. Regarding domestic violence, girls talked about a woman's varying ability to fight back physically. As a girl explained when referring to a domestic fight that occurred in front of her house, "A man cannot hit a woman and even less in the street. If it was me, I would have broken his neck."

Similarly, girls described corporal punishment as ineffective for catalyzing children's behavioral change and a reason for them to leave their homes. One explained, "[My mother] has to talk to me instead of hitting me, because if she hits me, I will leave and I will do the same bad behavior again."

Verbal violence was also described as a common form of conflict. This type of aggression was primarily reported by girls. They described these arguments as taking place between women and primarily with their mothers. It directly impacted how they felt in spaces where it occurred as it was described as a source of stress and offense.

Girl 1: The one that is crazy is my mom. I say, "Mom let's sit and talk," [mother] says "Sit and talk?" She said a lot of bad things and said her bad

things too. What, am I dumb? The words that she tells me offends me. If she offends me, I offend her. . . "You are a bitch," "I am not a bitch, bitch are. . .."

Girl 2: Your mother talks to you like that?

Girl 1: She even tells me that I am a whore.

Harmful Substances/Drugs. Boys and girls both described substance use as an antecedent to violence and indicated that its use or distribution increases the risk of violence in the area. The overconsumption of alcohol was noted as one of the main problems affecting the community functioning in Santa Ana. One boy, describing a community member, stated, "Whenever he gets drunk again, he will break the TV again." A girl likewise explained, "Whenever they are on drugs, they do not recognize anyone, they even hit their own mothers."

Similarly, adolescents noted that violent outbursts were common when those addicted to illegal drugs were present. The violent behaviors associated with addiction were a repeated concern discussed across all FGDs. However, boys talked more about feeling threatened by the presence of addicts as there was an increased pressure to engage in performative masculinity (e.g., fighting or challenging). As one boy described:

> People here do not see you as a child [. . .] when [an addict] ask you for a cigarette in the neighborhood market and you do not have one to give them [addicts], they try to fight you.

In contrast, girls described the need for rehabilitation to address the risk associated with addicts in the community. One suggested, "I recommend opening a rehabilitation center, so they [drug addicts] get conscious and see that what they are doing is not right."

Another risk factor was illegal drug trafficking. Boys talked about this more often and in-depth than girls. Drug dealers included community and non-community members whose priorities were driven by money. Thus, violence was reported as a strategy used to control this lucrative trade. The spillover of this violence into the community was of great concern.

> They [drug traffickers] were attending the part where I live there are two . . . two sides . . . two parts where they sold drugs. Because they did not like each other at every moment. . . violence, violence, violence. (*Adolescent Boy*)

Group Affiliation. The second most salient theme informing the identification of safe and unsafe spaces was group affiliation represented by in/out-group status. This association to a defined social group (e.g., being a "Santanero" or

being from a soccer team) allowed them to access privileges, opportunities, or protections associated with the affiliated group.

Youth Groups. Both boy and girl participants described involvement in youth activities as the most important in/out-group safeguard against violence victimization or engagement. Adolescent' sports and dance groups were the most highlighted. The decreased risk of violence was attributed to activities admitting a selected group of adolescents, occurring with a certain frequency, and being managed or coached by a responsible adult.

While girls perceived being around or connected to sports groups as a safe activity, none explicitly stated that they participated as players. In this regard, one stated, "There is soccer for men but not for women." In contrast, the boys discussed being a part of a sports group as an important part of their lives. They specifically mentioned schools for soccer and soccer games as the most enjoyable and safe activities in their community. Also, they described sports as something that supported their wellbeing. Those activities were run by the District of Cartagena Sport Office, NGOs working in the region, or individual coaches from the community. However, in/out-group dynamics also emerged related to perceived barriers to sports participation. Although all adolescents were assumed to have the opportunity to join, the adult in charge decided who participated and political or social influences may inform this decision. Nepotism was described as blocking opportunities for some adolescents who wished to join. This dynamic limited some boys' ability to utilize these buffers against violent outcomes.

> **Interviewer:** How much do you feel you participate in those activities?
>
> **Boy 1:** Not much. . . because here what is valued is "la rosca" [being part of a certain group].
>
> **Boy 2:** The truth is that they [the coaches] are very "rosqueros" [nepotists]. They play with the one they know, if they do not know you, they do not put you in the list.
>
> **Boy 1:** They always put the same to play, the same ones. And the others? . . .when?

Girls were more likely to mention dance groups as a protective factor, although several boys participated as well. These NGO-funded organized activities were led by an adult from the community and occurred with regular frequency, providing a structure and sense of belonging. Usually, dance teams were well established and recognized both in and outside the community.

> [Adolescent girls] are in the dance group. We meet and talk. When there are meetings, we meet to get informed.
>
> Interviewer: And do you meet a lot or not much?
>
> Always, all the times we dance, we meet as a group. (*Adolescent Girl*)

Santaneros Versus Others. The second sub-theme of group affiliation was identity in relation to being a Santanero. This category is characterized by the degree to which others view that person as a member of the Santa Ana community. The most common delineation was being Santanero/native versus being an outsider (e.g., Venezuelan refugee, from the mainland or a tourist worker). Affiliation was discussed as determining ability to participate in some community activities. In terms of the participant's perceptions of safe spaces, an individuals' status of being part of the community was a protective factor. One boy explained, "Because if they don't know you, they will show more [aggression] and they will try to take your things, when they know you, they are not like that." Others gave examples of how the refugee Venezuelans that recently arrived were more likely to be robbed or victims of violence.

> They would like to make them [Venezuelan refugees] hungry and treat them wrong. Poor Venezuelans that are working, they treat them as rats, they tell them a lot of things. *(Girl)*

Designated Authority Roles. This theme refers to the presence of individuals having designated roles of authority that could undermine or promote the adolescent's sense of safety. The most frequently mentioned authority roles were police and school staff.

Police. The role of the police was especially highlighted, as they were expected to be responsible for peacekeeping, addressing violence and providing protection. The police's effectiveness in doing their duties, however, was perceived as poor by these adolescents. Both boys and girls expressed dismay at police corruption and their ineffectiveness in stopping crimes. They described feeling there was essentially no justice system to protect them.

> "Someone calls the police. . ." Hey they are killing each other here" . . . [the police] "I will go in one hour." So, they arrive when everything has finished and then they leave. *(Boy)*

This perception was most salient among the girls, who spoke about the need for effective policing and how current community practices were

compromising their safety. One of the girls stated, "The police put the youth to steal and then share half and half." Another girl expressed it by saying:

> Close to my home, drugs are sold, and [police officers] spend plenty of time there. [The police] . . . they go out until one in the morning. . . [drug traffickers] give them juice, [police officers] sleep there, they are always there. (*Girl*)

School Staff. Participants noting feeling that when these adults were present, they upheld accountability and discipline of those engaging in problematic behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying). They were perceived as having the authority to protect or provide positive assistance to those engaging in risky behaviors inside and outside of the school setting.

> Once [the school staff] painted the park and a lot of youth, those that consume drugs, were able to paint. They [school staff] should do that more frequently so those youth [that are not in school] are not just hanging out there. *(Girl)*

The Importance of Time. The concept of time arose in adolescents' perceptions of risk and safety. They discussed time both in relation to their perceived safety in the past and depending on the time of day (e.g., 9 pm) and day of the week or year (e.g., January the 1st or Saturday vs. Monday).

Past. This category refers to socio-historical, cohort experiences. The time before and after the bridge joining the island to the mainland emerged as salient related to perceptions of risk. The period before the bridge was perceived as less violent; building the bridge introduced new risk factors that made their community spaces less safe.

> When [outsiders] invaded is when everything began. People that were not from here came and Santa Ana got corrupted, and also since that bridge was built, because [before] if someone killed someone, where was he going to [go]? [. . .] they could not escape (get lost) from here. (*Girl*)

Calendar Time. Another aspect of time was the time of day or year was a factor that informed adolescents' perceptions of their safety. For example, they noted the community was typically safer during the day and that public spaces were unsafe at night. Participants also linked the building of the bridge to this factor; once the bridge was built there was an increase in violent activities before and after daylight hours. For example, when asked if it was safe to walk in Santa Ana, one boy said "No, but during the day, yes."

Additionally, holidays and weekends were associated with increased violence. During the data collection period, youth reflected on several violent acts that recently occurred during the Christmas season. Furthermore, as weekends were often the time when people came together to celebrate or attend events, there was a perception among the adolescents that these were risky times the community.

> **Girl 1:** The 7th of December they killed [name of the victim] the day of little candles, I was in Cartagena when they told me.
>
> **Girl 2:** [referring to another killing] he was killed the first of January.
>
> **Girl 3:** In December, the people could not go out because there were fights every day.

The Adolescents' Spaces

Beyond identifying what factors contributed to their sense of risk, these adolescents described specific physical spaces as safe or unsafe. Participants were asked to portray the community spaces that they perceived as central to their daily lives and activities. They identified areas where gathering, socialization, and interaction were common for youth. Based on these adolescents' responses, we grouped spaces into *safe spaces, mixed safe spaces*, and *unsafe spaces.*

Safe Spaces. When participants were describing safe spaces, none mentioned feeling unsafe or that their perception of safety was threatened. These descriptions align with the researchers' characterization of safe spaces as places perceived to be absent of trauma, excessive stress, and actual or threatened violence or abuse (both physical and emotional).

The School. The only space identified as safe in the data was the local public school. Students clearly defined the school as a physical and social space. The most critical factor for ensuring safety was the presence of protective adults (e.g., teachers, principal, counselors, campus guards) whose authority over their learning and behaviors enhanced their sense of safety.

School-related protection from violence was described differently by girls and boys. Girls noted that bullying, particularly gender-based violence (e.g., sexual harassment, inappropriate touching) was not tolerated in school. They described teachers (school staff) as protective and willing to address perpetrators' behaviors directly.

> In the school, the teachers do not tolerate that [bullying], because [name of the teacher], all who go to bully, he stops them the same day. Because [name of the teacher] is a teacher that does not like that woman get touched, not even a hair. (*Girl*)

Girls reported adult messaging in school as empowering. These messages contributed to girls' sense of safety and their agency in recognizing their value in their community, larger society, and over the long term.

In contrast, a salient issue for the boys was discipline. Specifically, they acknowledged that when parents felt unable to address sons' engagement in risky behaviors or unsafe spaces, school staff were perceived as having the authority to do so. One boy demonstrated this when he said, "when [the parents] do not want to deal with us they send us to the school." They described teachers as protecting them and willing to address perpetrators' behaviors directly.

Mixed Safe Spaces. Mixed safe spaces were physical spaces perceived as either safe or unsafe (e.g., threatening, or violent) as a function of other factors. The perceived level of risk for harm was determined by who or what was occurring in the physical space at a certain time. Streets, the sports field, and homes were perceived as mixed, representing both private and public spheres.

Streets. It is understandable that street spaces, utilized by everyone to move through the community, were the most mentioned mixed safe space. The unpredictability of who would be encountered on the street informed participants' perceptions of when it was or was not safe. If it was a friend or another person with whom they had a positive relationship, the space was a safe place for interacting. More commonly, however, participants described risks, like the presence of illegal activities, that would lead to streets becoming unsafe spaces. Also, participants described how encounters between people who have had conflicts made violence expected. The street would suddenly be unsafe for anyone nearby. This was expressed by one boy who said, "if they have had a problem, and they see each other in the street they fight with machetes."

Gender also emerged as connected to perceptions of street spaces. Both boys and girls in the study noted that tensions related to masculinity seemed ever present in this space. The adolescents described some men as uniquely driven to "conquer" the streets. Boys noted that groups of older men would often harass younger men to display their strength and power.

Boy 1: [An addict] said "Give me $500 pesos." Even if you give them, they say "no, you are a bad person, let's fight."

Boy 2: That is what they do.

Boy 1: . . . and they take out the gun.

Boy 3: We must give them [the money].

Boy 4: Because they are the ones with more "balls" [testicles].

Many girls noted that while streets were an acceptable space to gather, it was unsafe for a woman to walk alone in the streets at night. One girl expressed this sentiment when referring to exercising in the streets: "[a girl] was jogging at 6 am, she was listening to music, she was with her phone and at that time the little girl was robbed."

The Sports Field (El Campo). The sports field in Santa Ana is a central physical space in the community. Referred to as "El Campo," this is also an important political and social space, used for large community gatherings and as a popular meeting place. Community leaders, NGOs, and others often have disagreements on the utilization of the space. Those disagreements are heavily influenced by local political dynamics. The space does not always have youth activities, there is not always an official authority that determines the use of the space, and a team affiliation is not always necessary to participate.

Only the boys mentioned the sports field as an important space. The saliency of this space for boys was tied to its role as a gathering place to engage in sports and related social activities. However, its status as mixed reflects its variable uses by different people for different purposes at different times. If a sports group or another organized, adult-monitored activity was taking place, these boys enjoyed a sense of safety on the sports field. One boy articulated this when asked to discuss the positive activities in Santa Ana: "The soccer/fútbol school [that take place in the sports field]." However, when substance use and trafficking were present, this space was perceived as unsafe, reflecting a threatening atmosphere. The construction of the bridge also played into the perceived risk of this space, as noted by one participant:

> Before [the bridge] it was 10. . .11 [at night] and we were still playing [on the sports field]. But that part was taken away to consume drugs. Now we play until 10 and that's it. (*Boy*)

Individuals' Homes. Home is a private sphere space defined as place occupied by an adolescents' family or a group of families. Homes were described

in relation to families—parents, caretakers, siblings, and other relatives—and as mixed spaces, relating to protection from or exposure to violence. Many noted that their homes offered an escape from violence occurring on the streets. For example, one adolescent described, "when there are fights in the street everyone goes into their houses [to find refuge]." However, many also noted that homes became unsafe in context of family interpersonal violence, including domestic violence, parent use of corporal punishment, and other forms of abuse. Some participants reported that violence was common in their homes and something that they have gotten used to. Still, many were disturbed by familial violence, recognizing that it impacts their safety in the home and their own (and others) overall wellbeing. They acknowledged a need for psychological help for their parents who use violence to address conflicts in their relationships.

> **Girl 1:** When my dad hit my mom, I cried and left because he would hit me.
>
> **Girl 2:** My mom hit my dad too.
>
> **Girl 3:** Both hit each other then.
>
> **Girl 2:** All both hit each other. They even break ladles on each other. All of them need psychological help.

Unsafe Spaces

The only space that was deemed consistently unsafe was the Picos. Picos refer to a set of big speakers stacked together that play Afro-Caribbean music in a concert type setting. These events can be formal or informal. The informal events are free and take place on the streets as large community parties, while the formal events are led by profitable Picos' organizations that rent spaces (e.g., private outdoor yard or field), charge an entry fee, and sell alcohol. Both girls and boys consistently described these formal Picos as unsafe due to the various risky and illegal elements in this setting, including violence, alcohol misuse, drug use, and a lack of security (e.g., police presence).

Picos. The adolescents perceived Picos as having an indirect influence on their safety by increasing aggressiveness in the ones attending them. One boy expressed that by saying: "It is the [formal] Picos who put them like that [aggressive]."

Picos' unsafe reputation was bolstered by the lack of structure and regulations applied to their activities. For example, participants noted that the police allow Picos to go longer than they should, even though it is widely understood that violence risk is higher when Picos play longer at night and when

more alcohol is consumed at the gathering. The bribery and associated corruption increased participants' perceptions of Picos as unsafe environments.

> The police [. . ..] are *money-driven*, when they see the loaded parties, since they pay them money, they allow them to play more hours. And that is why fights get formed, because fights happen at the last hours. (*Adolescent Girl*)

Discussion

The findings about these adolescents perceptions of violence and safety can be analyzed through various levels of the ecological model. As stated above, this theoretical framework considers the interplay of factors affecting the developing organism and, in this case, allows us to discuss these adolescents' perspectives through a holistic framework. Also, by performing the analysis desegregated by systems, we can suggest better-contextualized interventions within each level.

Chronosystem

From the adolescents' perspective, the insecurity increased after the bridge's construction (2014), when the community transitioned from being isolated to being connected with the mainland. The whole history and culture of the community were centered around isolation, and this condition strengthened the identity and the social fabric under which the community grew. The bridge opened the community to external factors, changing the chronosystem structure. This specific event (the construction of the bridge) increased tourism coming from neighboring urban areas, which allowed for the introduction of drug dealing, crime, and other associated risks. This dynamic has also been documented in various rural and tourist places, such as the island of Gotland in Sweden, in which authors showed the impact of tourism on crime due to social disruption (Ceccato, 2016; Park & Stokowski, 2009).

Macrosystem

In this case, cultural factors made gender a determinant in how these adolescents were exposed to violence and in the risk of becoming perpetrators. The boys described being expected to behave following masculinity norms, which put them at greater risk of becoming victims and perpetrators of violence. The boys described performing aggressive behaviors and defending their honor when confronted with hostility as the best way to protect themselves in the present and future. This intended behavior is consistent with quantitative

research conducted by Chaux et al. (2012) in Colombia. They found that exposure to community violence was a predictor of reactive aggression, and that this effect was stronger for boys than girls. These authors also found that beliefs that legitimate aggression were the stronger mediators of this relationship (violence exposure and aggression). Thus, violence exposure may promote the culture of "law by one's own hands," which was reiteratively expressed by the adolescent boys in this community. Also, this culture of hegemonic masculinity is consistent with qualitative research conducted by Browne et al. (2021) with adolescents in two similar regions in Colombia, where they also feel the pressure to reassert their masculinity by utilizing violent behaviors.

Exosystem

Participants in this study perceived the Picos as an indirect influence affecting them. Although these gatherings took place in a demarcated environment, all factors identified across other spaces contributed to Picos being perceived as risky and unsafe. The adolescents noted that the high level of alcohol consumption, usage of illegal substances, and illicit behaviors contributed to increased violence in their surroundings. The lack of authority figures enforcing rules or dispensing consequences was another reason Picos were perceived as unsafe. Together, these factors support the literature examining the contextual risks associated with music spaces (Harakeh & Bogt, 2018). For example, Stephens et al. (2009) found that while Hip Hop cultural contexts offer higher levels of risk-taking opportunities (e.g., marijuana and alcohol consumption, male-to-female, and male-to-male violence), risky behaviors were not caused by the music culture. The research in this area also notes that these spaces are critical for bringing together young adults to listen to music and engage in meaningful cultural exchanges through the art of music, language, and dance (Harakeh & Bogt, 2018; Stephens et al., 2009).

As Picos take place at night and are most prevalent during holidays or weekends, there is an increased likelihood of violence, a trend noted in research on domestic violence, major sporting events, and other large social gatherings (Boutilier et al., 2017; Brimicombe & Cafe, 2012; Hughes et al., 2011). Furthermore, the Picos' rise in popularity coincides with the recent construction of the bridge. Mainland sound systems can easily access the island, highlighting the intersecting influence of the chronosystem when considering risk factors.

The additional layer of perceived ineffective and corrupt policing may reflect structural inequalities affecting the larger Cartagena region, which in 2015 ranked second on Colombia's Cities Exclusion Index (Ayala-García &

Meisel-Roca, 2016). These inequalities represent the suboptimal level of services for low-income and Afro-descendant communities in Colombia. In many cases, better-trained police officers who specialize in youth policing are placed in other communities (Berkman, 2007; Moncada, 2010). This reality shows how structural inequalities in these participants' exosystems shape the adolescents' experiences in marginalized communities like Santa Ana.

Microsystem

School was identified as a safe space and provided a buffer from community or familial violence. The presence of authority figures commonly protected children both inside and outside of school via the enforcement of policies and rules. Furthermore, while various forms of violence (e.g., bullying, gender-based, psychological, and physical) occurred in this setting, teachers' commitment to protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable increased these adolescents' sense of safety in this space. Also, organized youth groups lead by adult coaches taking place outside the school provided safety amid an adverse environment. These individuals were perceived as safeguards for healthy development.

Due to the lively and daily community interactions, the streets and the sports field can be considered part of these adolescent's microsystem. These are open gathering places that could be used by anyone in the community and were perceived as mixed safe spaces. Like prior research findings, the youth in this study must continually reassess how to interact with and find safety in public or private spaces to protect themselves from violence (e.g., DaViera & Roy, 2020; DiClemente et al., 2018; Donenberg et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2013; Kotlaja et al., 2018; Mmari et al., 2014). For example, adolescents in Teitelman et al. (2010) study in Philadelphia described hearing shotguns, seeing drug transactions, and personally knowing victims of gun violence that occurred on the streets outside their homes. Despite these realities, the adolescents readily played sports and hung out on the streets in their low-income urban neighborhoods.

It was noteworthy that adolescents frequently perceived their homes as unsafe. Unfortunately, for many adolescents in communities that have experienced multigenerational poverty and violence, this dynamic experience of homes is common, with a higher rate of violence exposure among girls (Mmari et al., 2014; Scorgie et al., 2017). In the current study, specific actions increased perceptions of homes as unsafe, including parental use of corporal punishment. In these cases, the parents were perceived as threatening rather than as sources of protection. Prior research has noted that when parents use violence against children, both as a form of punishment or strategy to cope,

the children's sense of security and comfort within familial spaces decreases (Martin et al., 2017). These adolescents also perceived homes as unsafe when violence among adults (e.g., domestic violence) or substance abuse occurred. This discovery aligns with research demonstrating that children's perceptions of their parents as protective or responsible decreases when these behaviors occur, lowering their sense of safety and desire to remain in the home (Fairbairn et al., 2018; Kuppens et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2017).

Future Directions and Practical Implications

The current study provides foundational points of intervention for addressing barriers to safety and supporting communities' efforts of resiliency in the face of emerging social problems. Drawing from these findings, we have two recommendations intervening in different ecological systems. Due to the known impact of the microsystem on adolescents' development, we suggest that respected adult figures who create safe spaces (e.g., school staff and coaches) be provided with the skills and resources needed to be stronger support systems for adolescents. Given the level of influence they have on adolescents' perceptions of safe spaces, these key figures can protect adolescents from harmful behaviors identified as occurring in the community's private and public spheres. Their age, community membership, and defined role impacts adolescents' wellbeing and provides a community-level authority figure to effectively negotiate with the adults in adolescents' lives (DiClemente et al., 2018; Sieving et al., 2017).

In the macrosystem, we suggest designing gender-informed interventions specifically addressing masculinity attitudes and norms related to violence. While most research on violence focuses on women's gender-based violence victimization, the current study highlights the centrality of violence victimization across many community spaces for adolescent boys. This normalization of street violence can put boys at an increased risk of continued victimization or becoming perpetrators of violence (Browne et al., 2021; Deuchar & Weide, 2019). Thus, interventions addressing violence must be centered on models reflecting the familial and community values from a cultural humility lens. For example, a boxing program with gang and ex-gang members in a community experiencing poverty and exclusion in Copenhagen utilizes the boxing gym as a secure space for males to validate their masculinity. The program further provides therapy rooms within the boxing gyms where individual and group meetings are held to discuss frameworks of masculinity that influence the participants' wellbeing (Deuchar & Weide, 2019). Other evidence-based violence prevention programs exist, such as Coaching Boys into Men (CBIM). CBIM aims to transform norms that foster domestic

violence perpetration by increasing the positive impact of the actual coaches working in the community (Miller et al., 2012). Due to the recent building of the bridge (2014) and the impact of it in the adolescents' perception of safety, these actions have a sense of urgency.

Also, as an effort to use the voices of the adolescents to advocate for these interventions and others, the first author of this manuscript is involved in a project called *Our Voice* Citizen Science Research Method. It aims to discover challenges to adolescents' wellbeing in Santa Ana through a photo voice methodology occurring inside the school and outside the school (streets and parks). The adolescents already presented the results to decision makers to advocate for change with the results obtained inside the school (Montes et al., 2022) and outside of it.

Study Limitations

It is important to consider the methodological and contextual limitations of these findings. While four focus groups ($N=40$) are appropriate for obtaining saturation (Hennink et al., 2019), the specificity of the context would not be appropriate for broader generalization to adolescents in regions not experiencing similar situations (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Second, the team relied solely on one school for the recruitment process, which may have contributed to selection bias.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into adolescents' perceptions of violence in a high-risk, understudied region. The factors that shape adolescents' perceptions of safety were located at differing systems levels of influence, yet they interacted across the systems to shape youth perceptions of safe spaces in their daily lives. Identifying this is critical for understanding adolescents' violence and safe spaces experiences in a community facing significant economic, social, and identity changes. Further, as the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018) has noted, safe spaces offer adolescents security and dignity while interacting with others. These results are critical for shaping health outcomes and sense of wellbeing for the next generation of community adults and leaders. Thus, this study should be a first step for informing policies aiming to promote a healthier development in this context and in other communities facing similar characteristics and socio-economic transformations.

Appendix A

Questioning Route of the FGDs for Adolescents in Santa Ana (principal questions)

1. Let us start off by talking about you.
2. What does the school mean to you?
3. What do you think is the role of the school?
4. Now, let's talk a little bit about Santana Tell me about your community.
5. Let's talk about some of the concerns you mentioned before about Santana. Which are the main challenges for youth?
6. Talking about different forms of violence: Tell us about the types of violence present in Santana.
7. Still thinking about the challenges present in Santana and focusing on violence issues. How would you describe your experiences of violence?
8. Still thinking about violence issues: does it mean the same if a women or girl is hit, yelled, abused or bullied, than if man or child is?
9. Thinking about your health, what are the things that you do here in Santana that you consider healthy practices?

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the support of Kimberly Marín, Elisa Bárcenas and all the members of *Institución Educativa de Santana.*

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was supported by the National Institutes of Health Fogarty Center's Global Health Equity Scholars (GHES) Program mentored training grant (NIH FIC D43TW010540).

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