

Selected RW Comments on Karen S. Boyd draft of
“Olie, Olie, Oxen Free: Is school a safe place for high school students?”
April 8, 2002

[NOTE: Karen has graciously agreed that I can post her paper along with some of the comments I made on it]

While you still need to do a lot of work, this is a far better written paper than most of the drafts. You know how to lay things out in a clear and professional matter. (The fact that these comments are relatively long reflects the fact that your paper is clear enough for me to offer specific suggestions, not that you've done more things wrong than other people have.). Things I especially like:

- You describe the data set. A lot of people just say they are using the GSS, without even explaining what GSS stands for. You could make your description a little better by pointing out what makes the NELS the best, or at least a good, data set for this problem. Also, any weaknesses of NELS for your purposes could be noted.
- Nice, clear descriptions of most of the variables. Some people lapse into using SPSS-ese with their variables; just because SPSS limits you to 8 character variable names doesn't mean that you have to do that in your writeup. Your practice of giving the variable name followed by the description of the variable is pretty effective. Anybody who wanted to try to use the same variables could, but at the same time the content of the variable remains clear. You could do a little better in places.
 - In the tables, say F1black (1 = black, 0 = other), F1sex (1 = Male, 0 = Female)
 - Explain the SES scale more. Don't just say it is an index. Indicate what its range is (e.g. scale ranges from a low of -3 to a high of 3). Try to say a little about how it was constructed (e.g. “NELS researchers created the SES index through a factor-weighted combination of family income and parental education”)
 - The most glaring weakness in the variable descriptions is for the DV, feelings of safety. Is this a yes/no dichotomy, a 100 point scale, or what? You definitely want to be clear on this, otherwise the results are hard to interpret. Also, the coding of the DV helps to determine what statistical procedures are appropriate.
- Also good is that the paper is pretty well organized. I would suggest explicitly labeling your different sections, e.g. Introduction; Data and Methods; Results; Discussion.

Some things to work on:

- Perhaps the biggest weakness is that there isn't any sort of theory section, nor is much done to motivate interest in the topic in the first place. You should have more of a lead-in before you jump to the description of the data.
 - You could toss in some statistics on the rise in school violence.
 - You could elaborate on the Catholic/Private difference: is there reason to believe or suspect that safety or the determinants of safety differs across school sectors, and if so could that have an impact on achievement?
 - Your blocks of variables all seem reasonable, but be explicit as to their rationale. State explicit hypotheses, e.g. H1: Those who have had personal experience with crime will feel less safe at school. H2: Those living in rural areas will feel safer in school.
 - And then, given that you are running separate Catholic/Public analyses, you should offer some hypotheses as to how and why you think the two should differ.

[Numerous comments and suggestions on the actual analysis have been deleted. Among other things, I suggested Karen think about whether running totally separate models was really the best way to get at Catholic/Public school differences. I also made suggestions for various diagnostic tests she should run. The comments were fairly detailed, which would not have been possible if Karen had not provided so much detail herself]