

TOWARD THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY INDICATOR SYSTEM: UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY [608]

Gina Arnone ^a
Alice Gualpa ^a

^a Program Evaluation and Research Branch, Los Angeles Unified School District

Abstract

Student input is crucial in the assessment of a school community’s safety conditions. Using maps as data collection tools allows students to precisely indicate problem areas. The visual representation provided by maps powerfully conveys student concerns, and provides an opportunity for stakeholders to work collaboratively to enact change.

Introduction

In order to succeed in school, students need a safe learning environment. However, the importance of creating and maintaining safe school communities transcends a reactionary response to current episodes. To address the long-term needs of our schools, a number of agencies have partnered with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to create the Working Group for Safer School Communities (see Table 1). The Working Group aims to develop a standard process for assessing conditions that contribute to violence in a school community and to assist local efforts in implementing appropriate intervention strategies.

Table 1. Members of the Working Group for Safer School Communities

● LA City Council Member offices	● USC Departments of Social Work & Education
● LA Mayor’s office	● Healthy City Project
● LA City Attorney’s office	● LAUSD
● LA Housing Authority	○ Board Member offices
● LAPD	○ Communications
● LA City Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families	○ Chief Operating Officer
● LA Department of Transportation	○ Local District Operations
● LA County Probation Department	○ Environmental Health & Safety
● LA County Education Coordinating Council	○ School Police
● CA Attorney General’s office	○ Youth Relations
● LA City Human Relations Commission	○ General Counsel
● LA County Human Relations Commission	○ Facilities Division
● LA Housing Authority	○ Crisis Counseling & Intervention
● LA County Juvenile Services	○ Program Evaluation & Research

As part of the Working Group’s assessment efforts, we piloted a survey aimed at understanding students’ perceptions of safety on their campuses and communities. The following pages outline the development and implementation of this project and provide recommendations for a Web-based system that will further improve the accuracy and utility of the data provided by students.

Background

The Working Group for Safer School Communities was born out of a need for a multi-agency collaboration to address safety issues facing LAUSD students. The Working Group began its commitment to safety with ten schools (nine high schools and one middle school) designated as “priority schools.” In order to guide their work in the priority schools, the Working Group established the following three goals:

- To establish partnership among senior officials of LAUSD and city and county agencies to support violence prevention efforts in local school communities
- To develop a standard process for assessing conditions that contribute to violence in a school community
- To assist local efforts to assess conditions and implement appropriate intervention strategies in 10 priority school communities

The pilot campus and community safety survey supported the Working Group’s assessment goals. Regarding campus life we asked students to identify where they spend time, where they have witnessed violence, and what areas they avoid because of safety concerns. The community portion of the survey focused on routes to and from school and places students avoid. Thus, the survey functioned to communicate students’ experiences at their schools and in their communities.

In many ways, this project was designed as a “proof-of-concept.” First, we were exploring the concept of using student data to develop a campus and community safety indicator system. In this exploration, we sought to establish whether students would fully participate in the process and how best to gather data from students. Second, we were interested in what insights the students had regarding the safety issues they face at school and in their communities. To capture this data in a format that would allow for visual representation we used campus and community maps. This design reduced the abstractness of a conventional survey and improved the quality of data collection by allowing students to precisely indicate problem areas and incidents of violence.

Methods

We administered the mapping survey at each of the 10 priority schools. Following this initial data collection, we returned to each school to meet with a subset of those students surveyed for a small group discussion. The purpose of these discussions was to better understand the information that the students provided in the survey. We shared the student data with each school’s safety collaborative and the Working Group for use in school safety assessments, and we sought feedback on our process, which we modified for subsequent data collections.

Sampling

Survey

Due to limited time and resources, we opted to use a convenience sample at each school. Working with school administrators, six classes were selected at each site. In an attempt to get representative samples, standard courses were chosen, rather than specialized classes (i.e. Advanced Placement, JROTC). Each school’s sample represented various ethnic groups and included male and female students in all grades.

Focus Groups

Participation in the focus group discussions was voluntary. At each school, we explained to the students that we would enter the map data into a geographic computer program and then create campus and community maps with each student’s input represented. We further explained that we would return to the school to engage a small group of students in a discussion that focused on campus and community safety issues and, in particular, on the students’ perceptions of safety as depicted on the maps. Following the survey, those students who were interested in participating in such a discussion let us know by writing their names on a form. In partnership with a filmmaker creating a documentary on school violence issues, the first two focus group discussions were videotaped. At these schools, interested students were required to obtain written parental consent to participate.

Although students seemed interested in the project and were willing to share their experiences using the maps, the vast majority of students at the first two schools did not want to participate in the discussions. Having no group of volunteers from which to select participants, these two focus groups consisted of those students who did obtain parental consent (five students at the first school and four students at the second). After receiving an even lower response rate (one submitted parental consent form) at the next school, we decided that a conversation with a group of students rather than a focus group would lead to better understanding of their perceptions of this project. From these students we learned of a general distrust of the videotaping amongst the students. Despite our efforts to emphasize our focus, which was not on pursuing wrongdoers but on improving safety conditions, the students feared some kind of peer retribution for “snitching.”

Learning from this, we did not videotape subsequent focus groups and, as a result, the student response rate increased dramatically. With the remaining seven schools, we selected 16 students from the many who expressed an interest, making sure only that our selection included both males and females and a mix of grades and ethnicities. Due to absences and logistical difficulties gathering students at the discussion location, each group consisted of fewer than 16 students. For these seven schools, the focus group size ranged from 8 to 15 students.

Instruments and Data Collection

The initial data were collected with a mapping survey. Using a Geographic Information System (GIS), we created a campus map (a simplified blue print) and a community map (the geographic area within the school attendance boundary) for each school. In collaboration with an administrator, we decided on a day to visit with the previously selected classes at each school. Individuals from various city and county organizations joined us for the data collection providing valuable assistance. These included the county’s Human Relations Commission; the city’s Human Relations Commission, Commission for Children, Youth, and Their Families, Healthy City Project, Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office, and the Office of Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa; as well as the Office of an LAUSD Board member and LAUSD Central District staff.

Each student received campus and community maps and a box of colored pencils. To maintain anonymity, we asked students to mark only their birthdates and sex on each map. That information, combined with class rosters, allowed us to further deduce each student’s grade and ethnicity. Although the maps included legends detailing each piece of data the students were asked to record, we also provided step-by-step verbal instructions.

Campus Maps

With each class, we began with the campus map because of its relative simplicity. The students were asked first to indicate with green, blue, purple, and orange colored dots where they hung out on campus *yesterday* before school, during nutrition break, during lunch, and after school, respectively. We grounded this portion of the survey with a specific day since students likely spend their time in various locations on different days.

For schools without a nutrition break, that step was omitted. Students who go straight to class upon arriving at school, or who leave the campus immediately following the last class, were instructed not to mark any “before-school dots” or “after-school dots” on their maps. Also, students could indicate more than one location for any given time period by making multiple dots.

Next, in yellow, students marked any place(s) on campus that they avoid because of safety concerns. And last, students used their red pencils to identify those places on campus where they have witnessed violent or threatening acts. After working with four schools, this question was modified to ask only for those violent and threatening acts witnessed within the past five school days. For those remaining six schools, we also asked for information regarding when the incident occurred (day and time) and the type of incident (physical, verbal, injury, and/or involving a weapon).

Community Maps

With the community maps, students first located where they live and marked that location with an “x.” Those students who live off the map were instructed to find where they enter the mapped area on their way to school and mark that location with an “x.” Next, each student identified his or her mode of transportation to and from school by writing “walk,” “car,” “walk and bus,” etc. Students then used brown pencils to trace their routes to school, indicating with a square any places where they stop along the way and writing in that square how long they stopped there. Next, students used their red pencils to mark any place (street, corner, park, etc.) perceived as unsafe on her/his way to school. The same steps were repeated for the way home from school, using green for the routes and stops and purple for the unsafe places. Last, students marked in yellow the places in the community that they avoid at any time because of safety concerns. After working with five schools, we decided to simplify this portion of the survey by eliminating the indication of stops made along the way.

Focus Groups

Each focus group discussion took place at the school site during one class period and approximately one to two weeks following the initial data collection. We typically brought with us four maps (two campus and two community) that included each student’s data and particular survey results (i.e., where students hang out on campus in combination with where they have witnessed violence on campus or what places in the community students avoid). Copies of these composite maps were distributed to the students, and poster-size copies were displayed as a reference for the group.

Similar to the survey process, these focus groups benefited from partnerships with the aforementioned organizations, with the addition of a University of Southern California faculty member. Individuals from these organizations, many of whom had extensive experience conversing with or teaching youth, facilitated the discussions. As mentioned earlier, we held focus groups with nine of the ten schools. Two of the discussions were videotaped, the content of one discussion was captured by three note-takers and six discussions were audio recorded.

School Safety Collaboratives

School Safety Collaboratives and Safe Passage Subcommittees, comprising school administrators, school police, Los Angeles police, local and central district representatives, transportation authorities, and various other stakeholders, function to assess and address a school community’s safety concerns. We presented our process and site-specific data to, and received feedback from, eight school collaboratives. At the two schools without safety collaboratives we instead discussed the data with school administrators.

These collaboratives have proved crucial to the project’s development, especially in its early stages. They gave us an opportunity to discuss and assess our process with an engaged audience of stakeholders who offered valuable comments and suggestions. The process was, in fact, modified in light of this input.

Analysis

Maps

Each dot marked by the students on their campus and community maps was manually entered into GIS as a coded data point. The coding identified student characteristics (sex, grade and ethnicity) and distinguished between survey responses (i.e. where a student spends time during lunch as opposed to where on campus a student avoids). We were then able to tease apart the data looking for patterns and trends. For example, with the campus data, we could create a map illustrating hang-out locations by grade and another map depicting where males and females have witnessed violence.

These composite maps provided some interesting and useful information. For instance, by comparing maps indicating where students spend their free time on campus with those showing the locations of violent incidents, we found that in addition to the expected violence in crowded locations, much of the violence is occurring elsewhere. Therefore, students may be seeking out remote, unsupervised locations to fight.

As we progressed through this process, we developed more illustrative methods of displaying the data. With the fourth school, rather than showing clusters of dots, we began computing the density of students hanging out in particular areas on campus. We used different shades of color to represent varying density ranges. This not only made interpreting the maps easier, but it also made more sense, for students usually hang out in areas rather than in precise locations.

Applying a similar process to the community data, we created maps detailing those streets identified by the students as unsafe for traveling to and from school and those streets that they avoid because of safety concerns. Colored lines used to mark each of these perceived unsafe streets increased in thickness as the number of students who identified the streets increased. The thickest lines then clearly identified the areas of highest concern for the students themselves.

Discussion

Our next step with each school was to choose a set of maps (as mentioned earlier, typically two campus and two community maps) that best captured student perceptions. These selected maps were subsequently used as points of discussion during the focus groups, which provided an opportunity for students to explain their survey responses. Students offered explanations such as when and why specific community locations are unsafe, why they might avoid certain areas on campus, and how violence is addressed at their schools. The video and audio recordings of and notes taken on these discussions were then analyzed for content themes.

The maps also conveyed the students’ perceptions of safety to school safety collaborative members and provided a basis on which we could discuss and receive feedback on our process. In many instances, issues of safety that were identified by students verified the collaborative members’ own concerns, and the maps powerfully represented those concerns.

Findings

The pilot survey resulted in learning on two levels. First, as we progressed through the 10 priority schools, we collected data that informed our process at subsequent schools. Initially, we were uncertain as to how we might effectively understand students’ perceptions of safety in their school communities, but with incremental modifications we developed a process capable of obtaining meaningful and useful data. Second, through the survey and focus group discussions, we gained insight into some of the main areas of student concern regarding campus and community safety.

Process

At the outset, we questioned whether or not the students would tell us the truth. However, that concern was short-lived, as students unreservedly responded to the survey and their responses corresponded closely with both administrator and police perceptions of the campuses and communities. Also, students spoke openly and frankly during each of the focus group discussions.

Moving through this process, we also gained insight into the types of questions we needed to ask to get meaningful and useful data. In particular, the survey question addressing violence on campus did not initially specify a time period. Although students were asked to identify only those violent acts that they themselves witnessed (rather than rumored incidents) those acts could conceivably have occurred that same day or the previous year. Therefore, this survey insufficiently targeted the current safety conditions of the school.

Also, students were at first asked only to identify the location of such incidences. Although we deemed location crucial information, we needed to also know when an incident occurred in order to accurately represent campus violence. That is, without day and time information, it was quite possible that a given violent or threatening act was witnessed and reported by more than one of the surveyed students and, thus, that it was incorrectly represented more than once when we created the maps.

Therefore, for our later maps, we requested that students recall incidents that occurred during the past five days and to identify the day of the week and time of day next to each dot. With these later schools, we also asked students to report whether the observed violent or threatening act was primarily verbal or physical, whether it resulted in an injury, and whether a weapon was involved. Thus, by coding the temporality and intensity of each act, we were able to determine whether multiple dots in the same area referred to one or more acts, and we could remove any redundant observations and depict campus violence more accurately.

Student Data

During the focus group discussions, students articulated well their experiences both on campus and in the community. With the exception of students at one high school, whose maps showed their campus and community as safe, the maps provided a visual representation of students’ frustrations and concerns and a sound basis for conversation. Through these discussions, we gained valuable insight into the students’ characterization of safety in their school communities.

Campus

Students at every school mentioned overcrowding on campus as a source of concern. They described common spaces, such as the cafeteria or a quad area, as oftentimes having so many students concentrated in one location that conflict became difficult to avoid. One student bumping into another could incite a fight. And, when a fight breaks out, security may not be able to intervene due to the mass of students encircling the altercation. The students felt that the crowd also contributes to a general sense of confusion. With so many students, security and administrators often cannot differentiate between spectators and those who are directly involved. To escape the disorder and potential harm, numerous students stated they avoid these conflict-ridden areas whenever possible.

Although students expressed a general desire to avoid the masses, they also described a fear of the more isolated areas on campus. This somewhat contradictory concern resulted from the feelings of vulnerability experienced in unsupervised locations. Without adults or other students present, a student walking alone risks being robbed or “jumped.” For this reason, some students consider remote bungalow areas or certain bathrooms and locker rooms unsafe.

Students at eight of the nine schools that had focus group discussions described fighting as an element of the school climate. Both boys and girls fight frequently and for various reasons. Although students at all nine schools noted a gang presence on campus, they also noted that conflicts between students are not always gang-related. Often tension exists between cliques or between individuals for personal reasons. Students at only two of those schools identified racial tension as the main source of conflict on campus.

Students at seven schools expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the number and quality of security guards. With so many students, they think that heightened security presence is needed to deter fighting and to effectively respond to incidents on campus. Students agreed that a safe campus would have more security guards and police officers before, during, and after school.

Some of those same students, while asking for more security on their campuses, also expressed a distrust of existing security and police personnel. These students described some campus guards as poorly trained to handle conflict and lacking the strength and ability to intervene in a physical altercation. In their view, security guards and police officers have internalized certain stereotypes and unfairly point their finger at students based on appearance and dress.

Students at those same seven schools also expressed a desire for their teachers to become actively involved in issues of campus safety. Instead, they reported, teachers address academics only and instruct students to leave their problems outside of the classroom. These students feel that the seriousness of violence on campus should warrant class-time attention and that learning does not occur anyway with such distractions. In their view, teachers should concern themselves with campus life outside of the classroom and work toward reducing violence. Students feel that teacher presence alone on the school grounds and in hallways would have a mitigating effect on campus violence.

Community

Overcrowding within schools also creates some problems off school grounds. We found that, following dismissal, masses of students congregate near the campus and, with security and administrators far outnumbered, supervision is limited and conflict again becomes frequent. Also, numerous students described particular bus stops as very congested: buses arrive infrequently, and while these students wait, conflicts often arise.

Similar to what they said about campus safety, students in eight of nine focus groups described increased police presence as essential to community safety, and at the same time, expressed a distrust of law enforcement in general. Students identified numerous streets in their neighborhoods as unsafe and reported that more police officers would increase their comfort level traveling to and from school. However, they also reported police officers profiling students based on race and appearance. A few students offered personal anecdotes to illustrate their perception of law enforcement officials as untrustworthy and dishonest.

Students also expressed a desire for a general increase in adult presence in their respective communities. Those students who walk to and from school described numerous streets as isolated and, thus, scary. Females reported that neighborhood men harass them, and some feared sexual assault. Males reported harassment by gang members while traveling between home and school.

Although more prominent in some schools and discussions than in others, territorial conflicts affect each school community, and all of the focus group participants seemed to have an awareness of such issues. Students described tension rising both on campus and in the community when transferred students arrive from other areas. Some students expressed a strong allegiance to a particular housing project or to certain areas of their community and an extreme dislike of those from other areas. These students also identified the importance of staying within one’s own “territory” to remain safe.

Other factors identified as contributing to the student characterization of communities as unsafe include racial tension, widespread tagging, poor lighting, drug dealing and a large homeless population.

Implications

We began this pilot campus and community survey with several questions concerning the validity and potential usefulness of the data we aimed to collect. Very quickly we came to see the data as valuable and focused on improving its quality and our process. From the start, stakeholders embraced the concept, and their continued feedback and critiques facilitated the project’s progression. By sharing and discussing the data, we also learned of immediate and potential applications for the maps.

For example, maps depicting witnessed incidents of violence on campus and places students avoid because of safety concerns could inform school administrators’ placement of supervision (i.e., personnel and cameras). Also, comparisons of school population subsets (i.e., males and females; different grades) could inform any antiviolence intervention efforts by school staff or outside agencies. Community maps illustrating streets considered unsafe by students could alert law enforcement officials and community members and direct efforts to patrol areas while students are traveling to and from school.

However, it also became clear that a functional indicator of a school community’s safety conditions necessitates time sensitivity. The student survey must target a school’s current situation in order to produce useful data. Additionally, to maintain understanding of a dynamic school community, to track change, and to evaluate the efficacy of any recent innovations, schools need an indicator *system*, rather than a single survey.

Such a system requires a much more efficient process. The pilot survey entailed extensive coordination between our office and school site staff, and with the numerous individuals who partnered with us in administering the survey. The labor intensive process involved manually entering each data point before creating and interpreting the composite maps.

To address the need for an efficient and useful indicator system of campus and community safety, we are developing a Web-based version of this survey, which we will first pilot in 10 high schools and then implement in all LAUSD high schools. With a computerized survey, we can better target students’ routes to and from school as well as elements of campus life (see Figure 1).

Summary

In the coming months, while the technical system is developed, we will formulate the operational procedures. It is not necessary to have every student participate in each data collection. Using a sampling strategy, we can make generalizations about the larger student population. We estimate that a sample of 150 students will suffice for most schools, although the proper sample for a given school may differ slightly due to population characteristics. If a school chooses to collect safety data once per every 12-week quarter, between 450 and 600 students will participate in data collection each year. Three to four rounds of data collection should suffice to track changes in students’ experiences within their school communities.

At the school level, monitoring the participation of 150 students per quarter will be a challenging task, but achievable given proper levels of support. A preliminary inquiry into several schools’ computer resources revealed that each school has a computer lab that could be reserved on a given day for the purposes of this survey. These labs house approximately 30 to 40 computers, so the sample of 150 students could be reported to the designated lab during four or five class periods. By administering the survey to all 150 students on the same day, we would maintain time sensitivity.

Also, each lab is, or could be, monitored by a certificated staff member. And once the technology has been developed, it can help us better gauge what other types of staffing support the program’s implementation might require. As with the initial survey and the design of the maps, a pilot of the Web-based system in 10 schools can and should inform the procedures drafted prior to the widescale implementation of this indicator system.

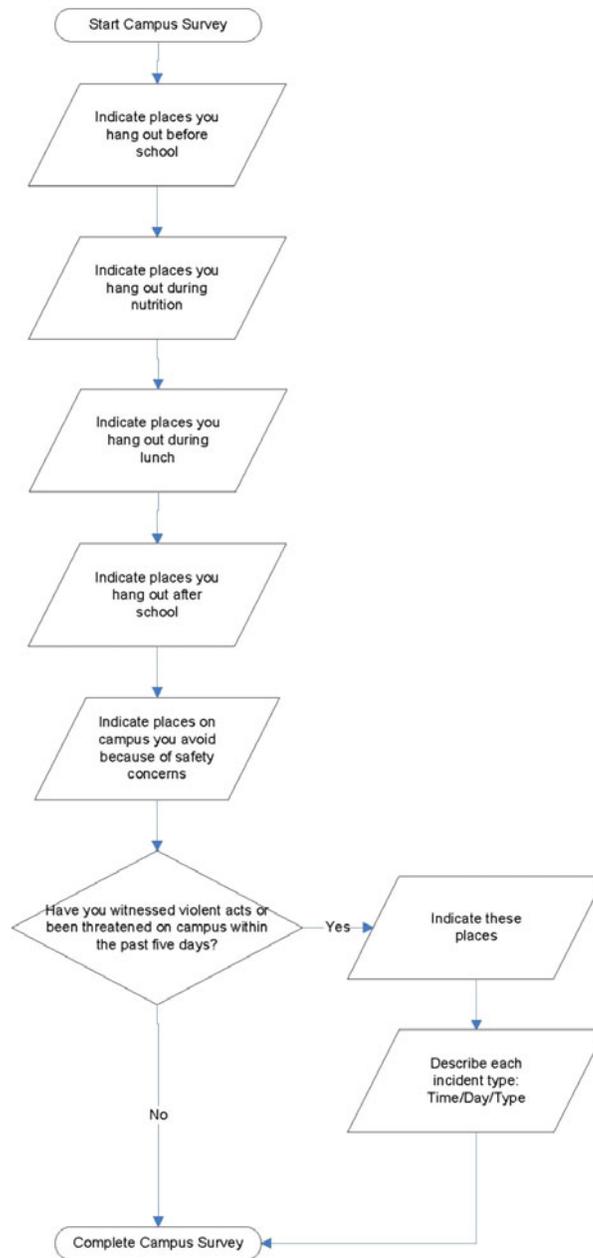
As the students told us, learning does not occur in the midst of a violent campus and students should not have to fear traveling to and from school. School community safety is a complicated issue that warrants action on multiple levels, and to enact and sustain change, we must address the entire school climate. However, student input is a crucial component in any plan aimed at improving safety conditions.

Additionally, through this project we have learned that numerous students consider as unassailable the atmosphere of violence and unrest in their school communities. Steps taken based on information provided by the students could, therefore, have empowering effects. Such actions may help students realize that conditions previously viewed as immutable can, in fact, change.

Figure 1. Draft data collection process diagrams

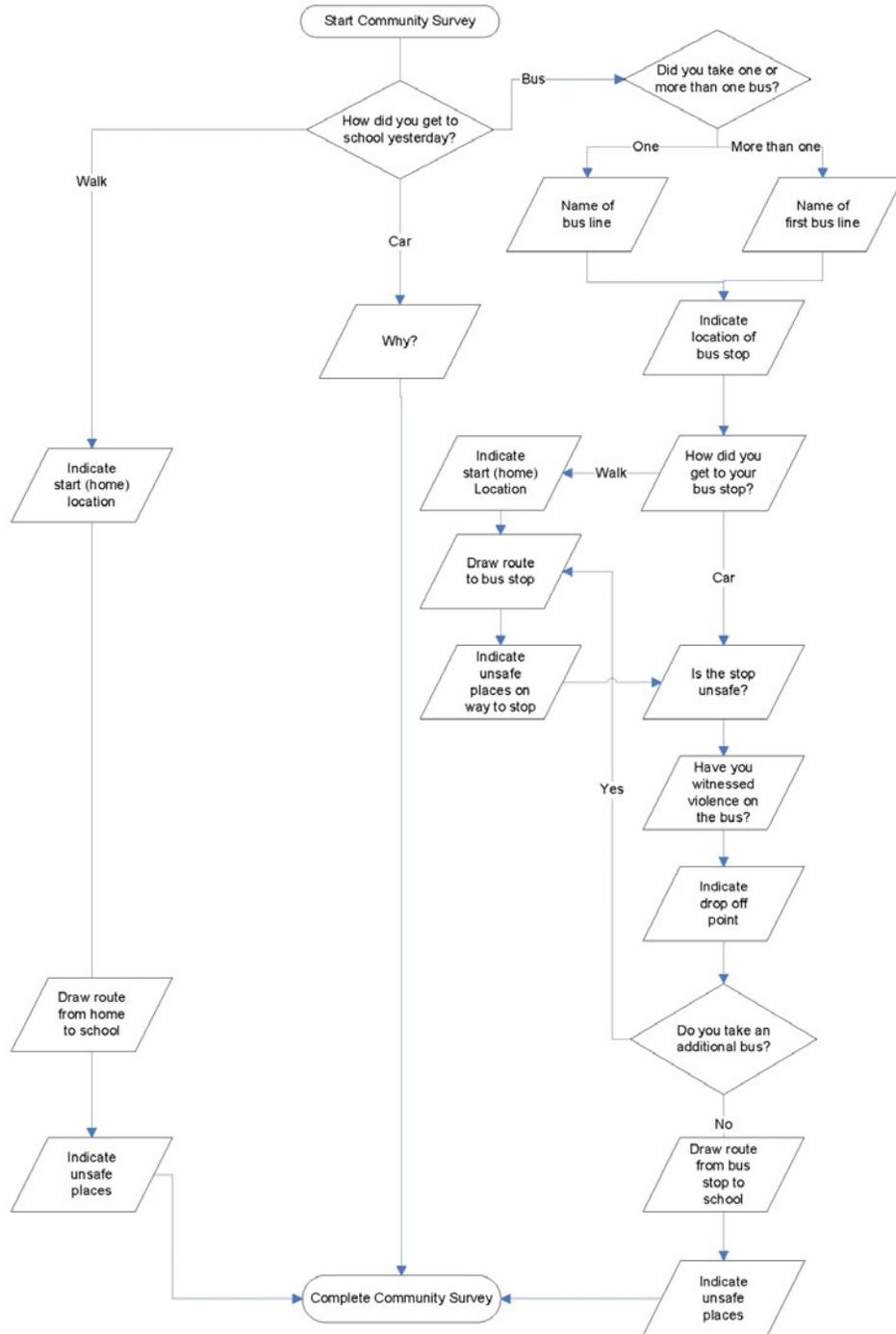
a) Campus

CAMPUS MAP DATA COLLECTION PROCESS



b) Community

COMMUNITY MAP DATA COLLECTION PROCESS



This page is blank.