LEX LOCALIS-JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

ISSN:1581-5374 E-ISSN:1855-363X
VOL. 23, NO. 10(2025)

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND ABSENTEEISM (CHRONIC ABSENCE) AMONG MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS (A FIELD STUDY IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN EL OUED PROVINCE, ALGERIA)

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Received: 23/01/2025 ; Accepted: 29/06/2025

Abstract

This study examined the level of perceived psychological school safety among secondary-school students, estimated the rate of chronic absenteeism (≥10% of membership days), and tested their association. A cross-sectional descriptive design was employed. A pilot study was conducted to adapt and validate the Arabic school safety scale (Manzil Al-Anzi, 2004); item–total correlations ranged 0.33–0.86, with Cronbach's alpha = 0.93. The main sample comprised 400 students from three secondary schools in El Oued (197 male, 203 female). Administrative attendance records were used to calculate chronic absenteeism based on membership days. Results showed that 72% of students reported high school safety, with significant differences across safety levels, while the school-level chronic absenteeism rate was 4.60% (low). Using Modified Poisson regression with robust standard errors, a 22% decrease in the prevalence of chronic absenteeism was observed for each +1 SD increase in perceived safety (aPR ≈ 0.78), with no significant sex differences. Findings highlight the importance of strengthening psychological safety (supportive relationships, positive discipline, clear rules) to maintain satisfactory attendance and prevent escalation into at-risk categories.

Keywords: Psychological school safety; Chronic absenteeism;Secondary education.

1. Problem Statement

School absenteeism is one of the most salient behavioral–organizational challenges facing education systems worldwide, given its learning losses and psychological and social repercussions. Although terms such as "frequent absence" are commonly used, contemporary research and policy adopt a more precise metric—chronic absenteeism—typically defined as a student missing 10% or more of school days in a year for any reason (excused or unexcused). In 180-day systems, this corresponds to roughly 18 days per school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2024; Attendance

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Works, n.d.). In the aftermath of the pandemic, official reports in many countries documented marked increases in chronic absenteeism, accompanied by declines in academic achievement and student well-being (U.S. Department of Education, 2024).

In the Arab—and specifically Algerian—context, Arabic-language studies have documented the prevalence of absenteeism and its psychological/organizational correlates (e.g., psychological stress, teacher–student relationship, classroom dynamics). However, most employ broad descriptors of absence and do not operationalize the standard 10% threshold, which weakens comparability across schools and over time and limits evidence-informed policy (بلقاسم، 2016؛ قرادي، 2022). This conceptual–measurement gap justifies Arabic studies that define absenteeism operationally by the 10% criterion and rely on administrative attendance records rather than self-report alone.

Concurrently, psychological school safety emerges as a pivotal dimension of school climate that is linked to students' sense of belonging, engagement, and attendance. In Arabic scholarship, recent work has documented associations between psychological safety and academic adjustment/belonging (زعابطة، 2022), discussed its determinants among secondary students (بولقارية، 2024), and highlighted the role of school counseling in strengthening students' sense of safety (مصبايح، 2021). Yet direct quantitative linkage between psychological safety and chronic absenteeism—using the standard definition—remains limited in Arabic literature, and multilevel analytical models that account for students nested within schools are often absent. Internationally, multilevel analyses indicate that supportive/safe school climates are associated with lower chronic absenteeism (Van Eck et al., 2017), offering a theoretical basis to test this relationship in Arab settings.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following questions:

- What is the level of perceived psychological school safety among secondary-school students?
- What is the rate of chronic absenteeism (≥10% of school days) in the sample based on administrative records?
- Is perceived psychological school safety associated with chronic absenteeism among secondary-school students?

2- Research Hypothesis

- There is a negative association between the level of perceived psychological school safety and the rate of chronic absenteeism among secondary-school students.

3- Study Objectives

- To investigate the association between the level of perceived psychological school safety among middle-school students and chronic absenteeism (absence ≥10% of school days during the year).
- To estimate the weighted prevalence of chronic absenteeism in the study sample based on the standard 10% threshold, using administrative school attendance records.

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- To measure students' levels of psychological school safety and school belonging using the Psychological School Safety Scale (Manzil Al-Anzi, 2004) and to examine its psychometric properties (reliability/validity) in the current sample.
- To derive practical recommendations for improving attendance by enhancing psychological safety.

4- Concepts and Terms of the Study

4-1- Psychological School Safety

The researcher treats psychological school safety as a state of inner reassurance in which the individual feels loved and accepted by others and perceives the environment as "friendly," with a rare sense of danger, threat, or anxiety (Al-Anzi, 2004, pp. 23–24).

Operational definition (as used in the study). Al-Anzi (2004) operationally defined psychological safety as: the student's feeling that he/she is loved and accepted by peers and teachers, holds a place among them, loves them and loves the school, perceives the school environment as friendly, has an active role in it, and does not feel danger, threat, or anxiety inside the school (Al-Anzi, 2004, p. 24).

4-2- Absenteeism; Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing ≥10% of school days during the year for any reason (excused/unexcused); this is a policy-research standard adopted internationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2024; Attendance Works, n.d.).

Operational definition (computation). The number of actual days absent is extracted from each student's administrative records, then the rate is calculated as:

$$\text{Absence rate} = \frac{\text{Days absent}}{\text{Total membership days}} \times 100$$

A binary variable is then derived: chronic (≥10%) vs. non-chronic, using the same threshold in comparative analyses (EdData Express, 2024).

5- Previous Studies

Table (01) summarizes prior studies that examined the variables of interest.

Study (Year)	Context/Country	Sample	Design/Instrument	Main finding
Van Eck, Johnson, Bettencourt	United States (urban)	25,776 students from 106 schools (middle/secondary)	Multilevel latent profile analysis of school-climate profiles	Schools with a "challenging" climate showed higher

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& Lindstrom Johnson (2017)				chronic absenteeism; strong climate–absence association.
Daily, Smith, Lilly, Davidov, Mann & Kristjansson (2020)	United States (West Virginia)	6,839 (middle) + 7,470 (secondary)	Path models linking climate/satisfaction, absenteeism, and grades	Positive climate and school satisfaction reduce absenteeism and improve achievement.
Virtanen et al. (2023)	Finland	1,066 students (longitudinal: grades 6–9)	Cross-lagged relations between supportive climate and truancy	Supportive climate predicts lower truancy over time, and vice versa (reciprocal negative relation).
Demir & Akman Karabeyoglu (2016)	Turkey (secondary)	581 students (grades 9–11)	Survey of absenteeism factors + links to school commitment	School factors and commitment are significantly associated with absenteeism.
Al-Anzi (2004)	Saudi Arabia (secondary – Riyadh)	Secondary sample (males)	Development/validation of the *School Social/Psychological Safety Scale* (22 items; $\alpha \approx 0.96$) + comparison of activity participants vs. non-participants	Participation in school activities is associated with higher psychological/social safety; provides an Arabic school-context measure.
Za'abata & Sahiri (2022)	Algeria (primary)	≈105 pupils	Association between psychological safety and school adjustment (Arabic measures)	Positive relationship between psychological safety and school adjustment.
Boulkaria & Harkas (2024)	Algeria (secondary)	Details in article	Descriptive profiling of psychological safety and its determinants	Documents variability in psychological safety and school/family determinants.
Kourat & Mostafai (2017)	Algeria (middle)	Teachers/Students	Survey of reasons for absenteeism (school/family/personal factors)	Identifies key reasons for absenteeism and points to school-level interventions.
Qeradi (2022)	Algeria (middle)	Middle-school students	Relationship between repeated absences and achievement	Repeated absence is associated with lower academic achievement.
Belkacem (2016)	Algeria (secondary)	Secondary students	Psychological stress and reasons for absence	Psychological stress is significantly linked to higher motives for absence.

Empirical Component

1- Study Methodology

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Given that the present study seeks to identify the nature of the relationship between its variables—psychological school safety and chronic absenteeism—the descriptive method is the most appropriate approach. Accordingly, this method enables us to determine whether a relationship exists (or not) between the study variables and their associated indicators.

2- Study Population

The study population comprises all students enrolled in the secondary schools of Bouchoucha, Abdelaziz El-Cherif, and Essaid Abdelhai in the city of El Oued, with a total of 1,982 students. The following table presents the population by gender:

Table (02). Gender distribution of the study population

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	979	49.39%
Female	1,003	50.61%
Total	**1,982**	**100%**

As shown in the table, the number of male students in the population is 979 (49.39%), while the number of female students is 1,003 (50.61%).

3- Pilot Study

The pilot ran from 20 January to 03 March 2025. Its aims were to determine the final form of the research instrument, test its suitability, trial administration procedures, and interact with the study sample. We also sought to identify potential obstacles in order to mitigate them in the main study.

3.1 Calibration (Norming) Sample

The pilot included a calibration sample of 50 students.

3.2 Validity of the *Psychological School Safety Scale* – Manzil Asran Al-Anzi (2004)

1) Instrument description. This scale was developed by Manzil Asran Al-Anzi (2004) in Saudi Arabia. It consists of 22 items measuring psychological school safety. Responses are Yes/No, scored 01/02, respectively.

2) Psychometric properties.

a) Scale validity (internal consistency). Internal consistency validity was assessed via item–total correlations. The results are shown below.

Table (03). Item–total correlations of the Psychological School Safety Scale

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Item	r	P	Item	r	p
1	0.58	0.01	12	0.46	0.05
2	0.86	0.01	13	0.40	0.05
3	0.48	0.01	14	0.33	0.01
4	0.65	0.01	15	0.55	0.01
5	0.47	0.01	16	0.57	0.01
6	0.52	0.01	17	0.46	0.01
7	0.69	0.01	18	0.51	0.01
8	0.35	0.05	19	0.73	0.01
9	0.65	0.01	20	0.72	0.01
10	0.52	0.01	21	0.61	0.01
11	0.48	0.01	22	0.38	0.01

Overall, the item–total correlations ranged from 0.33 to 0.86. Most correlations were significant at $p = 0.01$, with the remainder significant at $p = 0.05$.

b) Scale reliability. Reliability was estimated using Cronbach's alpha. Results are shown below.

Table (04). Cronbach's alpha reliability

Variable	Cronbach's α
Psychological School Safety	**0.93**

This alpha value (0.93) indicates high internal consistency for the scale in the pilot sample.

4- **Main Study**

4.1 Delimitations of the Main Study

- **Location:** Conducted in three secondary schools in the city of El Oued—Bouchoucha, Abdelaziz El-Cherif, and Essaid Abdelhai.
- **Timeframe:** From 16 April 2025 to 30 April 2025.
- **Participants:** A sample of 400 students drawn from the three schools above.

4.2 Main Study Sample and Its Characteristics

We visited the three secondary schools (Bouchoucha, Abdelaziz El-Cherif, Essaid Abdelhai) in El Oued and obtained the necessary student statistics (the target population for this study). A stratified random sampling procedure was used because it captures all strata of the population; the final sample comprised 400 students, representing 20% of the original population. Proportions were then calculated for each stratum (gender), the study instrument was administered, and participation was active across strata. The table below shows the gender distribution of the sample:

Table (05). Gender distribution of the study sample

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Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	197	49.39%
Female	203	50.61%
Total	**400**	**100%**

As shown, male students numbered 197 (49.39%), whereas female students numbered 203 (50.61%).

5) Statistical Methods Used

Data for the study sample were entered into a computer and analyzed using SPSS according to the study variables, in preparation for conducting the statistical analyses required to answer the research questions. The procedures included:

1. **Descriptive statistics** of the score distributions: percentages, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, and skewness coefficient.
2. **Pearson's correlation coefficient**.
3. **Cronbach's alpha (α)** reliability coefficient.

6) Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion of Results

6-1- Presentation, analysis, and discussion of the first research question

Research question. *What is the level of perceived psychological school safety among secondary-school students?*

Relying on the hypothetical (reference) mean, we obtained the following data:

Table (06). Distribution of students by level of psychological school safety

Variable	Low		Moderate		High	
	Frequency	**%**	**Frequency**	**%**	**Frequency**	**%**
Psychological school safety	36	09%	76	19%	288	72%

From Table (06) it is evident that 36 students (9%) fall in the *low* level of psychological school safety, 76 students (19%) in the *moderate* level, and 288 students (72%) in the *high* level. To verify whether the differences between these levels are statistically significant, we computed the chi-square (χ^2) test; the next table summarizes the results.

Table (07). Significance of differences between student levels in psychological school safety

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Indicator	Observed frequency	Expected frequency	χ^2	Significance level
Low	36	133.33	1.08	0.01
Moderate	76	133.33		
High	288	133.33		

As shown in Table (07), the value of $\chi^2 = 1.08$, which is reported as significant at the 0.01 level. Accordingly, we can state that there are statistically significant differences among the psychological school safety levels. Since the largest percentage is in favor of the *high* level, we answer the first research question as follows: the level of perceived psychological school safety among secondary-school students is high.

Placing this result in the context of the literature, Arabic-language evidence supports favorable levels of perceived school safety and its positive links with school outcomes. For example, Al-Anzi (2004) documented higher psychological/social safety among secondary students engaged in extracurricular activities and provided a direct Arabic measure of school safety. Descriptive and analytical studies likewise point to positive associations between psychological safety and school belonging/adjustment, consistent with the predominance of the *high* level in our sample (Za'abata & Sahiri, 2022; Boulkaria & Harkas, 2024). International work also supports a broader causal framework in which a positive school climate—encompassing feelings of safety and supportive relationships—is associated with higher satisfaction and engagement and lower negative indicators (Daily et al., 2020; Thapa et al., 2013).

Conversely, countervailing evidence indicates that the picture is not uniform across contexts. UN reports on violence and bullying in schools across the Middle East and North Africa highlight elevated exposure rates in some environments that can weaken perceived safety and affect well-being and attendance; accordingly, other studies may observe *moderate* or *low* safety levels in particular samples or regions (UNESCO, 2019/2024). This contextual variability suggests that the high level observed in our sample may reflect local successes—such as effective counseling programs, positive discipline, or anti-bullying initiatives—and should not be generalized without considering school/community characteristics.

In explanation, the elevated perceived safety may be attributed to the presence of supportive teacher–student relationships, clear rules, and fair disciplinary practices—factors linked in the literature to greater school belonging (Goodenow, 1993) and to overall school climate quality (Thapa et al., 2013). Since belonging constitutes a central psychological mechanism connecting climate/safety to behavioral and achievement outcomes, the sample's skew toward the *high* level provides a logical basis for the subsequent result regarding the negative relationship between safety and chronic absenteeism: where safety is higher, better attendance and lower absence are expected.

6-2- Presentation, analysis, and discussion of the second research question

Research question. *What is the rate of chronic absenteeism (≥10% of school days) in the sample based on administrative records?*

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After extracting the administrative attendance/absence file from the school system, membership days were calculated for each student (i.e., the days the student was enrolled and the school was actually in session), excluding weekends, official holidays, and any periods prior to enrollment or after withdrawal. Next, all days absent for any reason (excused/unexcused, including out-of-school suspension) were summed, and each student's individual absence rate was computed using:

$$\text{Student absence rate} = \frac{\text{Days absent}}{\text{Membership days}} \times 100.$$

A student was classified as "chronically absent" if the rate was ≥ 10%, which is the policy–research standard (including all absence types) and is based on the concept of membership/enrollment days in education department guidance.

To obtain the school-level chronic absenteeism rate, the number of students classified as chronically absent was divided by the total number of enrolled students with positive membership days, then multiplied by 100.

Using the procedure above, the school's chronic absenteeism rate was 4.60%. Based on *Attendance Works* thresholds, we classify this as low (Satisfactory) when <5% of students are chronically absent; 5–9% is at risk, 10–19% is moderate chronic, and ≥20% is severe chronic.

Accordingly, we answer the second question as follows: the chronic absenteeism rate (≥10% of school days) in the sample, based on administrative records, is 4.60%, which is low. Thus, the school—given this sample's data—is in a sound preventive status (Tier 1), while cases approaching the 10% threshold should be monitored closely to prevent escalation into higher-risk bands. It is also noteworthy that the rate lies relatively close to the 5% cut-point, meaning that even small shifts in student engagement or enrollment policies could move the indicator into the at-risk category; hence the need to sustain universal attendance supports.

This reading hinges on an accurate definition of the denominator (membership days)—the days the student was enrolled and instruction was in session, rather than the entire calendar year. Including all absence types (excused/unexcused/suspension) clearly distinguishes chronic absenteeism from legal truancy, which focuses only on unexcused absences. For precision, it is important to verify local counting rules (e.g., treatment of half-days), how transfers/withdrawals are handled, and the completeness of entry/exit dates in the records; shortcomings in any of these can artificially lower or raise the rate.

6-3- Presentation, analysis, and discussion of the study hypothesis

To test the study hypothesis—*there is a negative association between the level of perceived psychological school safety and the likelihood of chronic absenteeism among middle-school students*—we applied Modified Poisson regression with robust standard errors (SE) to estimate

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adjusted prevalence ratios (aPR) for a non-rare binary outcome, which is more interpretable than logistic odds when the outcome is relatively common. The results are shown in Table (08).

Table (08). Value and significance of the relationship between the level of psychological school safety and the likelihood of chronic absenteeism.

Predictor	Definition in the analysis	Crude PR	95% CI	p	aPR (adjusted)*	95% CI	P
Psychological safety (per +1 SD)	0–100 score standardized (Z-score)	0.82	0.70–0.97	0.019	**0.78**	**0.64–0.96**	**0.017**
Sex (male = 1, female = 0)	Control variable	1.36	0.66–2.81	0.404	1.31	0.63–2.71	0.463

* aPR adjusted for sex, with clustering at the school level (random intercept).

Interpretation. The Modified Poisson model indicates a clear negative association between perceived psychological school safety and the probability of chronic absenteeism. After adjusting for sex, the adjusted prevalence ratio (aPR) for psychological safety (per +1 SD increase in the Z-standardized score) is 0.78 (95% CI: 0.64–0.96, p = 0.017). This means that each one-standard-deviation increase in psychological safety is associated with an estimated 22% decrease in the prevalence of chronic absenteeism (1−0.78)(1-0.78)(1−0.78). Given that the overall chronic absenteeism rate in the sample was low (≈ 4.75%), an illustrative absolute translation suggests that a student +1 SD above the mean in safety would have a predicted risk around 3.7% (illustrative calculation), noting that these comparisons are read on the prevalence-ratio scale rather than odds.

The direction and significance are consistent in the unadjusted model (crude PR = 0.82; 95% CI: 0.70–0.97; p = 0.019). Once sex is included as a control, the estimate strengthens slightly to aPR = 0.78, suggesting minimal confounding by sex and a relatively stable negative association between psychological safety and chronic absenteeism in the adjusted model.

By contrast, sex itself shows no significant effect on chronic absenteeism (aPR = 1.31; 95% CI: 0.63–2.71; p = 0.463). The wide confidence interval is understandable given the small number of chronic cases (~19 out of 400), which limits the precision of the sex effect relative to the safety effect. Even so, the main inference remains: higher psychological school safety is associated with lower prevalence of chronic absenteeism.

These findings align with literature demonstrating that safe and supportive school climates are linked to higher engagement and attendance. Multilevel analyses show that schools with "challenging" climate profiles exhibit higher chronic absenteeism than positive-climate schools, and path models indicate that positive climate and school satisfaction predict lower absence and better grades. Theoretical accounts position psychological safety as a mechanism through which climate influences school belonging and, in turn, attendance. Contextual qualifications remain: in environments where violence and bullying are more prevalent and preventive structures weaker, the negative safety–absence link may vary in strength; this does not contradict the present results

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but cautions against over-generalization without careful description of school characteristics and programs.

General Summary

- The study included 400 students with an approximately gender-balanced distribution.
- Perceived psychological school safety was high for the majority of students (≈72% in the high category).
- The chronic absenteeism rate (≥10% of membership days) was 4.60%, i.e., low.
- Using Modified Poisson regression, each +1 SD increase in psychological safety was associated with an ≈22% decrease in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism (aPR ≈ 0.78), with no significant sex effect.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen universal (Tier 1) supports: foster teacher–student relationships, fair and consistent rules, and positive discipline; maintain robust safety and prevention procedures.
2. Early-warning attendance monitoring: track individual absence rates weekly, highlighting the 5–9% band (at-risk) for swift intervention before reaching 10%.
3. Targeted interventions (Tiers 2–3): individualized attendance plans, psychosocial counseling, family engagement, and morning care/transport programs as needed.
4. Anti-bullying and safety protocols: train staff and students to report and respond; implement clear response procedures that strengthen safety and belonging.
5. Boost belonging through activities: expand clubs, teams, and community service given their positive impact on engagement and attendance.
6. Data quality improvements: standardize the definition of membership days, handle half-days consistently, and document transfers/withdrawals precisely to ensure valid chronic-absence measurement.
7. Regular reassessment of safety: re-measure psychological school safety each term; use dashboards to display gaps by sex/grade/school and act on them.
8. Family and community partnerships: establish early contact with families and connect cases to health/transport/social support services to address attendance barriers.
9. Annual policy review: audit policies and procedures and link them to performance indicators (chronic-absence rates, safety/belonging scores, subgroup gaps).

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