School choice in deindustrialized cities:
A mixed method comparison of charter and public schools on safety and parental involvement in Detroit, Michigan

by

Daniel Edward Hamlin

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Daniel Edward Hamlin 2017
School choice in deindustrialized cities:
A mixed method comparison of charter and public schools on safety and parental involvement in Detroit, Michigan

Doctor of Philosophy, 2017
Daniel Edward Hamlin
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
University of Toronto

Abstract
Charter schools have rapidly expanded in deindustrialized American cities over the past twenty-five years where they have been touted as a solution to pressing school safety problems, low parent participation, and educational underperformance. Yet, research on charter schools has focused on student achievement, largely overlooking school safety and parental involvement. This thesis compares charter and public schools on perceived school safety and parental involvement in Detroit, Michigan in three studies in the sandwich format. With its large charter school sector, Detroit is a highly relevant setting, embodying the social and economic challenges of deindustrialized cities that have undergone charter school reforms.

In the first study, charter schools exhibited statistically higher perceived school safety, net of controls for neighborhood, school, and demographic characteristics. However, this relationship was largely diminished after accounting for parent-related characteristics. In the second study, non-profit managed charter schools elicited statistically higher parental involvement than for-profit managed charter and public schools while public schools reported greater parent decision-making, net of controls. The third study examined the mechanisms underlying the statistical results by conducting
site observations \((n = 40)\), interviews with parents \((n = 20)\) and teachers \((n = 20)\), and numerous informal interviews with different groups of stakeholders. Findings indicated that although charter school strategies were partly attributable to school performance, distinguishing attributes of school choosers conferred a self-selection advantage to charter schools.

Overall, charter schools in deindustrialized cities appear to offer a modest improvement on perceived school safety and parental involvement, but they are not accessed by the most disadvantaged students. Extending access to information and transportation may enable greater access, but policy remedies beyond school choice may be needed to address challenges in neighborhood public schools where extraordinarily disadvantaged students are likely to remain enrolled. Additionally, relationship-building and a parent presence in school may be strategies for improving perceived school safety. This thesis furthers existing scholarship by demonstrating the following: the importance of safety to school choice processes in deindustrialized cities; distinguishing features of school choosers among demographically similar families; and differences in safety and parental involvement strategies by school type.
Acknowledgements

In preparation of this doctoral thesis, I am deeply grateful to many mentors, colleagues, faculty, and staff who gave me incredible support and expert guidance over the duration of my doctoral program. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Scott Davies. An extraordinary mentor, he generously provided training, research experience, in-depth feedback, and numerous suggestions for my work that have not only made the completion of this thesis possible but also given me the necessary tools to pursue a scholarly career. I will strive to emulate his dedicated approach to supervision with my own future graduate students.

I would also like to thank my other committee members. Joseph Flessa has provided indispensable feedback at different stages of my research and on multiple drafts of this thesis. He has supported my scholarly growth in so many ways and has continuously pushed me to consider the broader significance of my scholarship. Thank you very much. I am grateful to Katyn Chmielewski for teaching me the quantitative methods that I used for this thesis and also taking a great deal of time to review my quantitative analyses. I would also like to extend my thanks to Stephen Anderson and Christopher Lubienski for their fresh and insightful perspectives that helped to improve this thesis. A special thank you also to Creso Sá who patiently worked with me at the outset of my doctoral studies when I had much to learn, supporting my first experiences presenting and publishing research and then providing ongoing mentorship even after our work together was finished.

I wish to acknowledge Monique Herbert for imparting, over the course of several years, rigorous training in statistics and approaches for teaching statistics to graduate
students. My gratitude also goes to the faculty in the Educational Leadership and Policy Program who provided a supportive and inspiring learning environment. A heartfelt thanks to the program’s administrative staff: Karen Dinsdale, Karolina Szymanski, Joanne Bedaisse, Gina Dangoy, and Vesna Bajic. Your expertise and flexibility are very much appreciated. Thank you to my friend and OISE colleague Gary Fogal for directing me to OISE, offering feedback on my work, and encouraging me to make the most out of my doctoral studies. Thank you also to my friends and OISE peers Robyn Read, Shasta Carr-Harris, Ayman Rizk, Alimamy Bangura, Zahide Alaca, Cindy Tsai, Kristjan Sigurdson, and Eric Lavigne.

I would like to recognize the generous funding from MITACS that allowed me to gain valuable experience in research and policy, collaborating with People for Education. I am indebted to People for Education’s Annie Kidder for taking time to engage me on the nuances of the school system in Ontario and for helping me to adapt my writing for a broad public readership. Thank you to David Cameron for the same and for working with me so closely for the past three years. I would like to thank the teachers, school staff, parents, students, community leaders, government officials, and organizations in Detroit who participated in this study and were very generous with their time. I am particularly grateful to Mary Hall-Rayford, Walter Cook, Tina Agnello, and Kyle Barret-Dold. Thank you to the Michigan Department of Education, Excellent Schools Detroit, the Detroit Police Department, and Data Driven Detroit for helping me gain access to the data used in this study. Finally, my wholehearted appreciation to the many friends and family members who supported me along this doctoral journey.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ch. 1</td>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch. 2</td>
<td>Are charter schools safer in deindustrialized cities with high rates of crime? Testing hypotheses in Detroit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch. 3</td>
<td>Parental involvement in high choice deindustrialized cities: A comparison of charter and public schools in Detroit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch. 4</td>
<td>A qualitative study of the mechanisms underlying perceived school safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch. 5</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1. Detroit’s Public and Charter Schools
Table 2. Special Focus Schools
Table 3. Description of Sample
Table 4. Descriptives for Variables
Table 5. Correlation Table for Perceived School Safety
Table 6. Independent T-tests between Public and Charter Schools
Table 7. Regression Predicting Perceived School Safety
Table 8. Independent T-tests for Neighborhood and Commuter Schools by School Type
Table 9. Regression Predicting Perceived School Safety
Table 10. Neighborhood Schools Reporting Below Average Perceived School Safety
Table 11. Characteristics of Public and Charter Schools in Sample
Table 12. Independent T-tests by School Type
Table 13. Independent T-tests by School Type for Charter Schools
Table 14. Regression Predicting General Parental Involvement
Table 15. Regression Predicting Parent Decision-making
Table 16. Formal Interviews by School Type

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of Detroit’s City Council Electoral Districts
Chapter 1

Introduction
Entering Detroit’s High School Choice Arena

Deborah Lewis¹ has been sending her son to a Head Start program in her neighborhood on the west side of Detroit, Michigan for the past four years. She is a single mother, working part-time at a clothing store across town and the Head Start program has been indispensable in her view, providing meals, diapers, extracurricular enrichment, and parenting workshops. This fall will mark a significant change: Ms. Lewis’ son will be leaving the Head Start program and entering into one of Detroit’s elementary schools. For previous generations of Detroiter, this transition to elementary school would have simply required enrolling in a neighborhood school assigned based on place of residence. But the public education landscape in Detroit has drastically changed over the past twenty-five years.

Detroit has become a “high choice” district where parents may, in theory, send their children to any of the city’s public and charter schools as well as public and charter schools in suburban districts surrounding the city. Within Detroit alone, charter schools together with district and state-run public schools present a dizzying array of elementary school options for parents like Ms. Lewis to consider. Among the school options available in Detroit are college preparatory, music and arts, math and science, aeronautical, Afrocentric, foreign language immersion, journalism, strict discipline, special education, magnet, service learning, and placed-based² education schools. Nearly

¹ Deborah Lewis was interviewed in Dec., 2015 during qualitative fieldwork for this thesis. For the purpose of confidentiality, the name provided is a pseudonym. The conditions of schools and neighborhoods described in the interview were also examined during field observations.
² Place-based education (PBE) seeks to engage students in local history culture, and landscapes, using local experiences as a lens for studying core subjects.
half of all students residing in Detroit attend over 100 different charter schools (Jahnke & Hanson, 2014). After New Orleans, the city of Detroit has the highest proportion of residents enrolled in charter schools within an urban district in the United States. The other half of Detroit’s students is enrolled in a diverse group of state- and district-run public schools.

As a new parent entering Detroit’s high choice arena, Ms. Lewis shares a socio-demographic profile common to many of Detroit’s parents. Approximately 40% of Detroiters live below the poverty line, few have received education beyond high school, and single females head more than half of all households with children (Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Detroit is the United States’ most impoverished large city and one of the country’s most segregated urban centers. Its population of just under 700,000 is 83% African American (US Census, 2011). Crime is one the city’s most urgent problems. Detroit consistently ranks as one of the United States’ most violent cities (Hammer, 2011; Raleigh & Galster, 2015). Like many Detroiters, Ms. Lewis rents a home in a neighborhood that has experienced long-term economic decline, suffers from considerably high rates of violent crime, and is plagued by extreme structural deterioration. School safety is of paramount concern for Ms. Lewis in looking for a school given the high rates of crime and victimization in and around many of Detroit’s schools and in her own neighborhood. After-school programming and school transportation are also important factors since she, like a quarter of all Detroiters (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2013), does not own a car. Beyond these fundamental needs, she would like to find a school that provides a high-quality education. She hopes her son will have a chance to go to college one day.
In searching for a school, gathering information can be difficult. Each school has its own set of admissions procedures, application deadlines, and open house dates, making Detroit’s school choice system one of the most complicated in the United States (Jahnke & Hanson, 2014). Ms. Lewis has spoken with other parents in her neighborhood, but few options seem to exist. Anticipating whether a school will remain open factors into the school selection process (Terry, 2017). Since 2000, 230 of Detroit’s schools have closed or restructured (Jahnke & Hanson, 2014; Joint House and Senate Education Committee, 2011). The neighborhood public elementary school closest to Ms. Lewis’ home closed several years ago and sits vacant along with nearly 81 other school buildings throughout the city. The next closest neighborhood public school is located over a mile away in a high crime area marked by abandoned buildings and infrastructural disrepair. The school does offer transport and after-school activities, but other parents with children enrolled in the school have complained to Ms. Lewis about weapons, fights, drugs, and gang activity at the K-8 school. For Ms. Lewis, the prospect of her five-year-old son attending school with middle school children in such an environment is disconcerting.

Over a mile from her home, there is a neighborhood charter school housed in an older building in poor condition. It offers no transportation for students and no after-school programs. Walking to the school seems to be neither safe nor convenient. As with so many schools in Detroit, abandoned buildings, graffiti, and drug houses surround the school building and mark the route from home to the school. Further from Ms. Lewis’ home, the next closest school is a state-run turnaround school that offers students’ transportation, after-school programming, and three meals a day. The school is located in a highly blighted neighborhood resembling the ravages of a war zone rather than a place
where children attend school. Three miles away, a charter school appears to offer a little more hope, advertising a safe and disciplined learning environment and providing before and after-school childcare. The school offers no busing options for students and no public transit routes exist between Ms. Lewis’ neighborhood and the school. Dismayed by the situation, Ms. Lewis has reached out to administrators at Head Start for advice. They recommended a selective enrollment public elementary school well-regarded for high safety standards, after-school programs, and student achievement. However, the school is located near the downtown core, far from her home, and the application and entrance examination periods for the school have passed. In the end, Ms. Lewis’ range of viable options for the coming school year is effectively a short list, comprised mostly of poorly performing schools with questionable safety.

The apparent lack of quality schools accessible to Ms. Lewis is at odds with lofty expectations for charter schools in depressed cities where many of the largest charter school markets have emerged. In cities like Detroit, local politicians have argued for charter school reforms by linking school choice to enhanced school performance and safety along with neighborhood crime reduction and community revitalization (Archbald, 2004; Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Cucchiara, 2013; Cucchiara, 2008; Davis & Oakley, 2013). At state and national levels, the charter school movement has also received remarkably broad support as a lever for school improvement, bringing together progressive-minded reformers desiring schools responsive to specific community concerns and conservative reformers aiming to drive school performance through market-based approaches to education (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2012; Scott, 2016). From the start of Republican George W.
Bush’s two-term presidency in 2001 to the close of Democratic president Barack Obama’s two terms in office, charter school enrollment has skyrocketed from under 500,000 to 2.9 million students (US Dept. of Education, 2014; NAPCS, 2015). A large share of this growth has occurred in deindustrialized cities where charter schools tend to serve low-income and minority students in areas beset by social and economic decline (Bettis, 1994; Dauter & Fuller, 2016; Davis & Oakley, 2013; Kann et al., 2013; Sampson, 2012; Sugrue, 2014). In shaping educational priorities, these social and economic dynamics offer important context for understanding the charter school movement in deindustrialized cities (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Davis & Oakley, 2013).

**Deindustrialized Cities and Charter School Reforms**

In the United States, the term “deindustrialized city” has come to signify industrial decline, population loss, and urban decay occurring over the past half century in cities that were once fueled by a prosperous manufacturing sector (Connolly, 2010). The effects of deindustrialization have contributed to high rates of poverty, crime, family dissolution, and many other adverse social circumstances in deindustrialized cities (Connolly, 2010; Wilson, 1996). Many of these cities are located in the Rust Belt region, an area that stretches from the northeastern part of the United States to the Midwest. In deindustrialized American cities, the process of deindustrialization began in the early 1960s. A number of different factors are thought to have initiated the loss of manufacturing, including foreign competition, labour costs, automation, and an overall transition to a service-oriented economy (Connolly, 2010; Sugrue, 2014).
In deindustrialized cities, challenges brought about by rises in crime, poverty, urban decay, and family dissolution have shaped the context for public education (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Sugrue, 2014; US Department of Education, 2015). Schools in deindustrialized cities have routinely exhibited low performance while student reports of victimization and exposure to criminal activity on school grounds have been distressingly high (Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2013; Lake et al., 2015; Skogan, 2015). As a proposed means of providing improved options for families in challenging settings, proponents of school choice have vigorously promoted the charter school model (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Maranto & Ritter, 2014). Over the past twenty-five years, charter schools have swept through deindustrialized cities, becoming one of the most prominent school reforms in these settings. In the Rust Belt region, for instance, deindustrialized cities, such as Detroit, Cleveland, Gary, and Flint, enroll between 30-50% of all students in charter schools (NAPCS, 2014). Many other prototypical deindustrialized cities like Toledo, Camden, Buffalo, and Trenton report similarly high proportions of students in charter schools (NAPCS, 2014).

**Economic and Social Dismantling of Deindustrialized Detroit**

The city of Detroit is emblematic of the historical, social, and economic realities of deindustrialized cities where charter school reforms have proliferated. Like other deindustrialized cities, Detroit has suffered from persistently high rates of poverty, crime, physical disrepair, and population loss (Sugrue, 2014). These problems have placed considerable strain on the provision of public education in the city, but Detroit was not always faced with such pressing challenges (Mirel, 2009). In the 1950s, the city was
arguably one of the world’s most prosperous cities, known for its thriving auto industry and strong middle class. One in ten of Detroit’s nearly two million residents worked in the manufacturing sector for automotive mammoths General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler (Sugrue, 2014). As the fourth largest city in the United States at the time and an industrial giant, Detroit was a highly influential city. The city’s once powerful manufacturing sector was thought to have been crucial to defeating the Axis Powers during World War II (Baime, 2014). By the 1960s, however, severe economic and social problems surfaced. Automation, restructuring, and rising foreign competition contributed to reductions in manufacturing employment and population decline that have continued unabated to the present day (Sugrue, 2014). The city’s economy has never fully recovered.

In the 1960s, as manufacturing and population decline were taking hold, Detroit was ground zero for struggles against discriminatory practices in housing, policing, and education spreading through many American cities at the time (Maraniss, 2015). The city’s African American community was well-connected to the national Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. led, what was at the time, the largest Civil Rights March in American history in Detroit in 1963 (Maraniss, 2015). The sixties were also the height of an ongoing demographic transition in the city. Many African Americans migrated to Detroit and other northern manufacturing centers from southern states during the Great Migration, seeking work in factories where labour shortages and high paying jobs allowed for economic opportunity unavailable to African Americans in the South (Mariniss, 2015). Detroit’s African American population doubled between 1940 and 1950 and then doubled again between 1950 and 1970 (Sugrue, 2014). These demographic
shifts were accompanied by Detroit’s White residents increasingly moving to suburbs ringing the city (Mirel, 2009).

As the Civil Rights Movement advanced in tandem with demographic changes, housing discrimination and residential segregation were battled not only in the courts but also in neighborhoods throughout the city (Sugrue, 2014; Mirel, 2009). Discontent over discriminatory policing practices in the city’s African American community reached a zenith in 1967 during a violent five-day riot that left 43 dead and thousands of buildings looted (Sugrue, 2014). Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in the following year, Detroit was the site of mass rioting again along with over one-hundred other American cities (Sugrue, 2014). As in many American cities, school de-segregation was one of the most contentious issues of the time (Mirel, 2009). In the well-known *Milliken v. Bradley* case, the NAACP fought to integrate Detroit’s schools through busing programs that extended into suburban school districts (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). After several years of court battles, the Supreme Court ultimately ruled against inter-district busing, effectively drawing a dividing line between cities and suburban school districts. The years of these court battles saw a rapid exodus of Detroit’s White population to the suburbs (Mirel, 2009). By the mid-70s, African Americans had become the majority in the city and 70% of the students in the city’s schools were African American (Mirel, 2009). The city’s first African American mayor was elected in 1974, beginning a twenty-year reign by proclaiming that criminals whether in “Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges” should “hit Eight Mile Road”, a baseline road separating Detroit from working class suburban areas (LeDuff, 2013). Many White residents interpreted Young’s statement as a warning to leave the city, further
accelerating White Flight to the suburbs (LeDuff, 2013). The steady departure of White residents to the suburbs took a toll on commercial business in the city while simultaneously reducing the city’s tax base (Sugrue, 2014).

During the 1980s and 90s, manufacturing continued its precipitous decline, unemployment rose steadily, and high rates of violent crime made Detroit one of the United States’ most violent and feared cities (Hammer, 2011). Abandoned factories, commercial space, and homes became commonplace as urban decay enveloped the city (Raleigh & Galster, 2014). The city grew poorer and more racially homogenous. From the early 1980s to the start of the 2000s, the proportion of White residents declined from approximately 34% to nearly 10% of the city’s population (Davis, 2012; US Census, 2011). Today Detroit is one of America’s poorest cities (Hammer, 2011). Employment in the auto industry is scarce and the middle class has largely vanished. The unofficial unemployment rate is thought to be around 35-40%, possibly the highest of any city in the United States. Detroit routinely ranks among the most dangerous American cities for violent crime (Solomon, 2014). With residents fleeing for decades, the city’s population has shrunk from nearly 2 million at its peak in the 1950s to under 700,000 today (Mirel, 2009; US Census, 2010). In recent years, growing numbers of African Americans with the means to do so have departed the city for traditionally White working class suburbs around the city. The departure of this segment of tax base has exacerbated budgeting shortfalls and contributed to even greater decay of the city’s infrastructure. By the late 2000s, the city had accumulated $18 billion in debt and contained an estimated 78,000 abandoned buildings (Reuters, 2014). Detroit became the first large city in United States history to file for bankruptcy in 2013. In the same year, Kwame Kilpatrick, the city’s
mayor from 2001 to 2008, was sentenced to 28 years in prison on corruption charges for offenses committed during his time as mayor (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012; Solomon, 2014).

In post-bankruptcy Detroit, a renewed push to revitalize the city has gained steam with non-profit organizations, local government, and wealthy investors partnering on prominent housing, employment, public safety, health, and education initiatives. Modest signs of economic renewal have emerged in the greater downtown area. Several large corporations\(^3\) (e.g. Compuware, Quicken Loans) have relocated their operations to Detroit and small businesses have established operations downtown to take advantage of inexpensive office space. The downtown area has experienced a 59% increase in the number of college-educated residents under 35 from 2000 to 2010 (Solomon, 2014). Large areas of the downtown core have also begun to gentrify with new housing developments rising and rents increasing at rates unseen in many decades. Despite these encouraging gains, the city remains among the most economically and socially beleaguered in the United States with many daunting problems to resolve before even considering a return to the affluence it once had.

**The Rise of Charter Schools in Detroit**

Public education has not been immune to the city’s struggles. School enrolment has mirrored the precipitous fall in the city’s population. In 1966, approximately 300,000 students attended Detroit Public Schools and nearly half of students in the district were White (Mirel, 2009). By 1980, Detroit Public Schools’ enrollment had dropped by

---

\(^3\) In February, 2017, Microsoft announced plans to move its Michigan office to Downtown Detroit.
approximately 100,000 students with the district becoming 86% African American in the process (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). The decade of the nineties saw similar trends continue: the school district was more than 90% African American and two-thirds of its students were living in poverty (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). Student achievement was the lowest of large school districts and growing violence and victimization on school grounds reached crisis levels in many neighborhood schools (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). By 2014, only 80,000 students remained in either public or charter schools (Center for Educational Performance and Information [CEPI], 2014). This student population which is largely African American and economically disadvantaged (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012), has consistently ranked at the bottom among American cities in test performance and graduation rates (CEPI, 2014; Council of Great City Schools, 2008). In Detroit, low student achievement has frequently taken a backseat to distressing school safety concerns. The city’s students have long reported alarmingly high rates of exposure to crime and violence in and around school and Detroit Public Schools has received sharp criticism for crime, gang activity, and poor school conditions (Kann et al., 2013; DYVPI, 2013; Horn & Miron, 1999; Lake et al., 2015).

Recurrent high profile cases of corruption and graft involving district authorities, elected school board officials, and teachers has had damaging effects on public confidence and the financial stability of Detroit Public Schools (Baidas, 2016). In 2009, US Education Secretary Arne Duncan slammed Detroit Public Schools, calling the district “a national disgrace” (Siegel, 2009). Prior to 2009, Detroit Public Schools overspent on its budget for seven consecutive years (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). Corruption, property tax delinquencies, declines in state aid, routine outflows of students,
and poor financial planning contributed to driving budgetary deficits upward (Siegel, 2009; Solomon, 2014). As experienced by other inner-city school districts facing financial turmoil (Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011), state intervention followed. In 2009, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm (D) declared a state of financial emergency, removing the locally elected school board’s control over budgeting. To oversee the school district, the governor appointed Emergency Manager Robert Bobb who subsequently uncovered hundreds of cases of fraud and bribery among administrators and teachers throughout the school system (Joint House and Senate Education Committee, 2011). During his tumultuous and highly politicized tenure, Bobb closed 59 schools with low performance and declining enrolment and removed 1,700 administrators and 91 principals from their positions (Solomon, 2014). Even with new leadership and governance structures, graft, kickback schemes, and cronyism have remained persistent problems for Detroit’s schools (Baidas, 2016). Although a small number of Detroit’s schools have undergone extensive structural renovations supported by federal stimulus funds (Detroit Public Schools, 2009), many of the city’s schools remain in a deplorable physical state. With funding shortfalls for much needed structural improvements, broken heating and piping systems, buckling floors, black mold, and ill-equipped classrooms have endured in many of the city’s schools (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). In 2012, Governor Rick Snyder (R) created the Education Achievement Authority (EEA) with the stated objective of turning around Michigan’s lowest performing schools. Subsequently, the Education Achievement Authority (EEA) took over 15 of Detroit’s public schools, injecting funds and resources, extending the school year by 40 days, and providing students with three meals a day. In spite of these efforts, the Education Achievement
Authority (EEA) schools do not appear to have fared well during the state takeover and are slated to rejoin Detroit Public Schools in 2017 (Zaniewski, 2016).

The progression of charter schools in the city has paralleled severe problems facing Detroit Public Schools. Officials promoting school choice in Detroit have ambitiously connected charter school reforms not only to improvements in public education but also to enhancements in public safety, new investment, and job growth in the city’s “new knowledge-based economy” (Jahnke & Hanson, 2014). Legislative changes at the state level first provided a legal pathway for the rise of charter schools in Detroit. In 1993, then-Governor John Engler (R) proposed the creation of charter schools as part of sweeping school reforms that included provisions for charter schools that changed Michigan’s largest revenue source for public education from local property taxes to state sales taxes (Hammer, 2011; Van Beek, 2010). This new charter school law aimed to equalize school funding across districts by making the state government responsible for school funding and disbursing funds on a per-pupil basis (Ni, 2009). Michigan’s charter legislation is also widely considered one of the least restrictive charter school laws (Miron & Nelson, 2002). The law defines charter schools as independently operated schools that receive public funding, referring to charter schools as “Public School Academies” (Michigan Department of Education, 2012). Any parent, teacher, or group may theoretically apply for a charter to operate a school through an authorizing body. Successful applicants of charter schools are thought to have a high degree of managerial autonomy and are not tied to collective bargaining agreements (Hammer, 2011). Michigan’s charter school legislation prohibits charter schools from charging tuition, vetting student applicants, or having religious association (Michigan Department of
Education, 2012). The first charter schools opened in Detroit in 1994 (Ni, 2009). Within five years, Detroit’s charter school enrollment grew to 5% of all students in the city (Data Driven Detroit, 2012).

Since their inception, charter school reforms have given rise to a number of influential actors participating in the provision of public education in cities. In public school systems, central school boards may manage funding, personnel, and facilities for all schools. Educational policies and legislation tend to devolve from a central policymaking body at the state level and federal level. In highly centralized systems, such as that under which the city of Toronto, Canada operates, lines of authority are even more direct with a provincial-level policymaking body setting policy, guiding curriculum, and centralizing funding (Hamlin & Davies, 2016; Parekh, Flessa, & Smaller, 2016). In many high choice US cities, however, some of the most significant challenges for many new charter schools relate to performing administrative and operational functions normally done by central school district authorities (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2010). Like many other charter school jurisdictions, authorizing bodies, local boards, educational management organizations, and education coalitions play key roles in facilitating school choice in Detroit’s charter school arena (Scott, 2016).

**Authorizing Bodies**

Prospective charter school founders apply to an authorizing body for a charter to establish a new school. Authorizing bodies are responsible for overseeing schools to which they have granted charters. Authorizers may be one of following organizations: the state board of education, the governing board of a state public university, a community college, a K-12 local school district, or an intermediate school district (Ni, 2009).
Authorizing bodies receive 3% of state funds for the schools that they authorize (Nelson & Miron, 2002). In providing oversight, an authorizing body takes on many of the activities of a locally elected school board. State funds are generally channeled through authorizers to charter schools. Each authorizer has different polices for opening new schools and closing underperforming ones. Fourteen authorizers are represented in Detroit, of which most are universities (IIPSC, 2014). Michigan law requires that authorizers consider the intended student population, the goals of school founders, the number of schools in the proposed school location that are among the lowest achieving when determining whether to issue a charter for a school (Michigan Department of Education, 2016).

**Local Boards**

A local board governs a charter school. Local boards are meant to have authority over school policies, operations, and finances. Its members are officially appointed by a state sanctioned authorizing body and must have representation from the local community in which a school intends to operate. A local board might be comprised of a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, parent member, and community representative. In many instances, appointed local board members are the founders of a new charter school (Miron & Nelson, 2002). Michigan law requires authorizers to stipulate term limits and the number of board members needed to form a local board (Mao & Landauer-Menchik, 2013). The local board must also operate independently of educational management organization with whom it contracts (Michigan Department of Education, 2016). Although authorizers are responsible for ensuring independence of the
local board, concerns have been raised about the influence of educational management organization over local boards.

**Educational Management Organizations**

Educational management organizations (EMOs) consist of both for-profit firms and non-profit organizations but are legally accountable to the non-profit charter school local boards with whom they contract (Miron et al., 2012). Like other businesses, for-profit EMOs chiefly exist to earn profit and gain a return on investment, whereas non-profit EMOs seem to have a community service orientation (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002; Scott, 2016). Both types of EMOs vary in scope, operating schools nationally, regionally, or at a single site (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002; Miron et al., 2012). The United States’ third largest for-profit EMO operates seven schools in the city of Detroit (Miron & Gulosino, 2013). In Michigan, most charters contract with an EMO although the role of an EMO varies – from providing specific administrative services to operating all organizational aspects of a school (Miron et al., 2012).

**Coalitions and Foundations**

Of the many organizations involved in Detroit’s public and charter schools, Excellent Schools Detroit is one of the most prominent. Excellent Schools Detroit, a coalition of educators, government officials, and philanthropists, was formed in 2010. Its aim is to help parents make sense of these vast choices by enhancing coordination, efficiency, and access to information. The coalition grades charter and public schools based on perceived school safety, parental involvement academic performance, school climate, and many other factors. A mere 16% of Detroit’s schools received a passing grade in 2014 (Excellent Schools Detroit, 2014). Excellent School Detroit has been
appointed to operate Enroll Detroit, a new common enrollment system, for the city’s charter schools, which was launched in the spring of 2015. The Skillman Foundation is also an influential actor in education and youth development in Detroit, funding Excellent Schools Detroit and many other organizations in the city. The foundation possesses a $500 million endowment and disburses $17 million in funds a year for projects in Detroit (Skillman, 2015).

As these actors have arisen in the charter sector in Detroit, charter schools have grown and, in some cases, moved into buildings where Detroit Public Schools had previously closed. In over the quarter-century since Michigan’s charter school law was enacted, 98 charter schools now operate within Detroit and more than half of all students residing in Detroit attend a charter school in Detroit or its suburbs. This proportion constitutes the second highest percentage of charter school students enrolled within an urban district in the United States (NAPCS, 2013). Table 1 presents a breakdown of schools attended by students residing in Detroit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Schools (#)</th>
<th>School Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Public Schools (DPS)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPS Self-Governing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPS Selective Enrollment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-run Turnaround (EEA)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charter Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Public Schools</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-run Turnaround (EEA)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suburban</strong> (over 50% Detroit residents)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>224</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Charter schools located in Detroit’s suburbs are not included in analyses in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Data on the variables of analysis for many of these suburban-located schools were not available. Potential for selection bias is expected to be stronger in suburban charter schools as these schools are likely to enroll...
families with relatively greater financial and social resources needed to commute to schools outside of Detroit.

The rapid growth of Detroit’s charter schools may partially reflect dysfunction in the public school system (Smith & Croninger, 1994; Lake et al., 2014). As an alternative, charter schools seem to have fared only slightly better as student outcomes have generally remained abysmally low in both the city’s charter and public schools. In a well-publicized study, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) created virtual matches between charter and public school students to examine performance differences. CREDO (2013) claimed that students in Detroit’s charter schools, on average, gained three months of learning over their public school counterparts. Nonetheless, both charter and public school scores continue to lag far behind state and national averages and whether Detroit’s charter schools have led to improved educational options remains vigorously debated (Dixon, 2016).

Despite the persistence of very low achievement, a small number of high performing charter and public high schools have shown promising results by graduating large percentages of their student bodies and sending the majority of them to university. A charter school founded by NBA star Jalen Rose in 2011, the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, recently sent 100% of its graduates to postsecondary institutions4 (Watson, 2015). Cass Tech and Renaissance high schools, two selective enrollment public schools with long-standing records of success, rank among the top schools in Michigan and their students routinely go on to prestigious universities (Mirel, 2009). But these schools are in the minority and it is uncertain whether all students have access to the few schools that

---

4 In follow-up field work, interviews with teachers indicated that Detroit’s students experience high rates of attrition at universities.
have demonstrated such effectiveness. Table 2 presents a breakdown of Detroit’s special focus charter and public schools.

**Table 2. Special Focus Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Schools</th>
<th>Charter Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Spanish-speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africentric</td>
<td>Bilingual (Spanish/English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Patient Care, Laboratory</td>
<td>Residential Mental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culinary</td>
<td>Service Learning (Police, Fire, Med. Services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career and Technical</td>
<td>Strict Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>Pregnant teen mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnet</td>
<td>Placed-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aeronautical</td>
<td>Science &amp; Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtual / Traditional Hybrid</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research examining school choice in Detroit has shown that many parents are left perplexed by the current system (Bell, 2009; Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Under Detroit’s school choice system, many parents seem to face complex barriers to participating effectively in school choice, lacking access to transportation and school information (Bell, 2009; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2012; Stewart & Wolf, 2012). In 2016, plans were put in place to create a common enrollment system for the city’s charter schools (Gray, 2016). The new system was intended to increase fairness and access to schools. However, the extent to which parents are aware that this new platform exists is unclear. Detroit Public Schools also opted out of participating in the new common enrollment system not long before it was launched (Gray, 2016). To make the current system more equitable, education advocacy groups in Detroit and current mayor Mike Duggan (D) proposed the Detroit Education Commission (DEC) to approve the location of new charter and public schools and to provide regulatory oversight of the city’s charter schools. In a $617-million-dollar bailout package for Detroit’s Public Schools, state lawmakers excluded the proposed Detroit Education Commission despite much political support for the
commission from local politicians in Detroit (Gray, 2016). The package did provide for a regulated return to local control of the city’s schools. A seven-member elected board has regained budgetary and hiring authority in the newly named Detroit Public Schools Community District, but many of the board’s decisions are subject to approval by state authorities. With the aim of deterring corruption, for instance, contracts ranging over two years or exceeding $750,000 must gain approval from the state. Notwithstanding the gradual movement toward local control, much political wrangling is likely to continue over how to return the city’s public school district to a state of normalcy. As observed in other high choice cities (Scott, 2016), many of Detroit’s political leaders have expressed disapproval with state legislators from predominantly White districts exerting so much control over Detroit’s schools and policies where residents are predominantly African American (Zaniewski, 2016). But with a disproportionate share of state funding being directed for major public sector bailouts in Detroit, state legislators counter that oversight is necessary to avoid financial mismanagement and corruption. The enduring racial politics between state and local authorities are acted out in these debates over Detroit’s charter school policies (Scott, 2016).

Considering the context for charter and public schools in Detroit, the city is a highly relevant case for the study of school choice. The set of social and economic circumstances experienced in Detroit are found in many other deindustrialized cities that have undergone school choice reforms. Detroit has a large charter school sector with more than half of students residing in Detroit enrolled in charter schools. The city’s charter schools are governed by a relatively unrestrictive state law (Miron & Nelson, 2002). It is not a “portfolio district” with a central office regulating the city’s schools,
theoretically permitting autonomy and market-based mechanisms to flourish without bureaucratic interference (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Drake, 2000; Nathan, 1996; Scott, 2016). With the city’s schools being dubbed a “national disgrace” plagued by severe safety concerns and chronic underperformance, the case of Detroit is important for understanding whether charter school reforms meet expectations in deindustrialized cities. Findings from Detroit may then offer important contributions to the scholarly literature and lessons for educational policy in deindustrialized cities where charter schools have expanded. The following section provides an overview of the study rationale, design, and potential contributions of this thesis to educational policy and research.

**Study Rationale and Design**

In deindustrialized cities, the charter school model has been promoted as a way to address school safety problems, low rates of parental involvement, and overall educational underperformance (Berends, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). Despite being one of the chief school reforms undertaken in deindustrialized cities, whether charter school policies have delivered superior outcomes in these areas is an important question that remains unanswered. Advocates claim that charter schools are able to enhance outcomes in these areas through mechanisms of autonomy, accountability, and competition (Maranto & Ritter, 2014). Research evaluating the relative effectiveness of charter school reforms has largely focused on student achievement, comparing standardized test scores between charter and public school students (Lubinski & Lubinski, 2013; CREDO, 2013). These studies have demonstrated mixed results across different state, city, and
school contexts while simultaneously spurring highly contentious debate over interpretations of statistical results and the methods used to generate them (Berends, 2015). The narrow emphasis on student achievement in scholarly research has largely disregarded other key priorities for the charter school movement in deindustrialized cities, including school safety and parental involvement. School safety has been one of the main reasons for justifying charter school reforms with many state charter school laws highlighting school choice as means of allowing all families an opportunity to enroll their child in a safe school (State of Michigan, 2003; US Department of Education, 2004). In addition, federal and state laws make explicit connections between school choice and an increased role for parents in establishing, operating, and participating in local schools (Smith et al., 2011). In deindustrialized cities, charter schools tend to echo legislative pronouncements related to parental involvement and safety in their school missions, curricula, and promotional outreach to families, highlighting safety strategies, attentiveness to parent needs, parent participation in school, and highly structured learning environments (Excellent Schools Detroit, 2014; Lubienski & Lee, 2016). Families in these settings tend to identify school safety and parental involvement as top priorities for improving education (Christensen, 2007; Excellent School Detroit, 2010; Horn & Miron, 2000; Lake, Jochim, & DeArmond, 2015; Wilson, Marshall, Wilson, Krizek, 2010).

Considering these priorities, school safety and parental involvement are crucial to evaluating the charter school movement in deindustrialized cities. Nevertheless, a very small number of studies have compared school safety and parental involvement between charter and public schools (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006;
Smith et al., 2011). These studies indicate that charter schools outperform public schools on safety and parental involvement. However, this inchoate strand of research has significant methodological limitations, lacking controls for demographic, school, and neighborhood characteristics. Most prior research in these areas also does not take self-selection bias into account. When parents take initiative to self-select into a school of choice, they may have denser social networks, greater resources, and higher levels of commitment to their children’s education (Hoxby & Murarka, 2007). If overlooked, the preexisting attributes school choosers may upwardly bias school comparisons (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Rose & Stein, 2014). Taking into consideration the preexisting attributes of school choosers may be particularly important when determining whether institutional characteristics of charter schools are attributable to observed rates of school safety and parental involvement (Betts & Tang, 2014). Another important limitation of previous work is that tends to treat charter schools as a uniform group. Yet, different types of charter schools appear to have specific institutional traits that may lead to divergent outcomes among schools (Brown et al., 2004; Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002).

This thesis uses a mixed methods approach to compare charter and public schools in Detroit, Michigan\(^5\) on perceived school safety and parental involvement in three studies in the sandwich format. The first study compares charter and public schools on perceived school safety by linking student surveys to data on demographic, neighborhood, and school characteristics. Additional statistical controls for student commute distance and parental involvement are used to shed light on potential self-

\(^5\) Only charter and public schools located within the city of limits of Detroit, Michigan are examined in this thesis. Quotes heading Chapters 2, 3, and 4 come from interviews done during fieldwork.
selection bias. The analyses distinguish between neighborhood charter and public schools and charter and public schools mainly enrolling students who commute to school from outside of their neighborhoods of residence. The second study compares charter and public schools on two indicators of parental involvement (general parental involvement and parent decision-making), using controls for school characteristics, socio-demographic factors, and student commute distance. The analyses differentiate between for-profit managed and non-profit managed charter schools and their public school peers. Statistical data for the first two studies were amassed from the Michigan Department of Education, Data Driven Detroit (a non-profit data analysis organization), the Detroit Police Department, the Urban Education Institute at Chicago (via Excellent Schools Detroit). In the third study, statistical results from the first two studies are investigated qualitatively by exploring school characteristics and distinguishing features of school choosers underlying perceived school safety. Semi-structured interviews with parents (n = 20) and teachers (n = 20) are conducted along with site observations (n = 40). These qualitative analyses are further informed by informal interviews with officials from Michigan Department of Education and Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA)6 as well as interviews with numerous security guards, police officers, teachers, parents, and community workers at school sites. These multiple qualitative data sources allow for triangulation of findings, reducing the biases that may be inherent to any one single data collection method (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Small, 2011). By comparing charter and public schools on perceived school safety and parental involvement, this thesis may provide an evaluation of charter school reforms in deindustrialized cities.

6 MAPSA is an organization of charter school stakeholders that advocates for charter schools in Michigan.
based on contextually-relevant educational priorities. The analyses may further elucidate self-selection processes, differences in school strategies based on school type, and distinguishing features of school choosers among demographically similar families in deindustrialized cities. Findings in these areas may have important implications for scholarly research and educational policy.
Chapter 2

Are charter schools safer in deindustrialized cities with high rates of crime?
Testing hypotheses in Detroit
I gave up coaching football in Detroit because of how dangerous the neighborhood was becoming. The final incident for me was a drive-by shooting as I coached at [Public] High School. I had 41 kids ages 11 to 13, almost all who lived in single parent homes – kids who had to dodge used heroin needles as they ran around on the field.

Introduction

The provision of a safe learning environment is a fundamental condition for school success (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Lacoe, 2015; Sebring et al., 2006). In deindustrialized cities characterized by high rates of crime, concentrated poverty, and urban blight, students report persistent exposure to violence and criminal activity at school (Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2013). This lack of safety in school is disconcerting. Unsafe school environments tend to have deleterious effects on students’ mental health, socio-emotional development, and academic performance (Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Ripsky & Gregory, 2009; Schreck & Miller, 2003; Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009). To address safety concerns, federal and state policies have envisioned school choice as a mechanism for ensuring that students have an opportunity to attend a safe school (Astor, Guerra, Van Acker, 2010; Lacoe, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This rationale for school choice has contributed to advancing charter school reforms in many high crime cities (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Sebring et al., 2006). As charter schools have expanded, families in deindustrialized cities have routinely cited safety as one of the main reasons for seeking out a school of choice (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; Lake et al., 2015; Stewart & Wolf, 2012).

With school safety being a priority for charter schools in many deindustrialized cities, understanding whether charter schools enable safer learning environments than public schools in these settings is crucial to evaluating charter school reforms.
Nonetheless, studies comparing charter and public schools have tended to focus on academic achievement (Betts & Tang, 2014; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013; Xiang & Tarasawa, 2015; CREDO, 2013) and competitive effects (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Jabbar, 2015; Ni, 2009), whereas research examining school safety is lacking. A small number of studies suggest that charter schools are safer than public schools, but this research does not use controls for student demographics, school location, and self-selection (Christensen, 2007; Schneider et al., 2000). When comparing charter and public schools, race and social class differences in school choice processes may influence school safety (Dauter & Fuller, 2016; Howell, 2004; Lindle, 2008). In cities with substantial crime and blight, charter schools may also increase perceptions of school safety by locating in neighborhoods with less physical disorder and lower crime rates than public schools (Burdick-Will, Keels, Schuble, 2013; Gulsino & Lubienski, 2011; Schreck, 2010). Self-selection may be the most salient consideration when comparing charter and public schools on safety. Controls for race and social class may not fully account for the distinguishing characteristics of families who opt for schools of choice in cities with high proportions of low-income African American families. Among demographically similar families, school choosers may have greater motivation and commitment to their children’s development (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009; Jones et al., 2009). For these reasons, the children of families who self-select into charter schools may exhibit fewer disciplinary and safety-related problems at school (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Jones et al., 2009). This potential bias presents a methodological challenge to determining whether charter schools produce an improvement on school safety or
whether they benefit from attracting highly committed families (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014).

This study compares perceived school safety between charter and public schools in Detroit, Michigan using student-reported survey data administered by the Urban Education Institute in 2014 and 2015. Student perceptions of school safety may be an important indicator of school safety, being associated with student well-being and academic performance as well as school violence and victimization rates (Hanson & Voight, 2014; Ripsky & Gregogy, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006; Whitlock, 2006). The analyses in this study improve on previous research comparing school safety between charter and public schools by including controls for demographic, neighborhood, and school characteristics. To explore the potential for parent-related selection bias, the analyses take an additional step, controlling for student commute distance and parental involvement. In comparing charter and public schools on perceived school safety in Detroit, this study examines a key indicator for evaluating charter school reforms in deindustrialized cities that has received little attention in the literature.

**Charter School Reform in Deindustrialized Detroit**

In deindustrialized cities with high rates of crime, physical deterioration, and poverty, politicians have tied school choice to not only school improvement but also community revitalization (Cucchiara, 2013; Davis & Oakley, 2013; Sugrue, 2014; Wilson, 2012). The case of Detroit, Michigan epitomizes charter school reforms in Cleveland, Gary, Flint, and many other deindustrialized cities. Detroit’s once thriving automotive sector has steadily declined over the past several decades, dramatically
diminishing manufacturing employment and leading to rising poverty (Mirel, 2009; Hammer 2011). Detroit’s population has shrunk from nearly two million at its peak in the 1950s to under 700,000 today (Mirel, 2009; US Census, 2010). Like other deindustrialized cities, continued departure of Detroit’s tax base has contributed to severe decay of physical infrastructure (Bettis, 1994; Sampson, 2012; Solomon, 2014). Crime may be one of the city’s most pressing challenges with Detroit repeatedly ranking as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States (Hammer, 2011; Raleigh & Galster, 2015).

These social and economic declines have shaped the context for public education in the city. Among Detroit’s youth, 83% are African American and 57% live below the poverty line (Stewart & Wolf, 2012; US Census, 2011). The city’s students report alarmingly high exposure to crime and violence (Kann et al., 2013; DYVPI, 2013; Lake et al., 2015). In 2013, 55% of Detroit’s high school students reported being a victim of violence and 87% reported having a relative or friend shot, murdered, or disabled by violence in the past twelve months (Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, 2013). As violent crime has frequently penetrated the city’s schools and made student commutes unsafe, school safety has long been a central concern (Horn & Miron, 1999; Kaet al., 2013). In 2010, Detroit became one of six cities to receive funding from the US Department of Justice for its Youth Violence Prevention Initiative. The initiative has led to new school violence prevention programs and enlisted community partners to patrol student routes to school (Detroit Public Schools [DPS], 2013). The city’s public school district, Detroit Public Schools, has also expanded partnerships with local police by establishing a school district police department. Nearly 200 police officers and security
personnel now work in the city’s public schools. The school district police department operates a central command center, using video surveillance to monitor schools (DPS, 2013). For Detroit’s charter schools, some have received grants through the Youth Violence Prevention Initiative and many tout safety and a highly-structured learning environment as school priorities (Lubienski & Lee, 2016). Nearly half of all students residing in Detroit attend a charter school, constituting the second highest percentage in an urban district (NAPCS, 2014). Similar to other high crime cities where charter schools have rapidly proliferated, families in Detroit have consistently identified safety as one of main reasons for seeking out a charter school (Horn & Miron, 1999; Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Yet, it is uncertain whether Detroit’s charter schools are safer than their public school peers.

School Safety in Inner Cities

The provision of a safe learning environment may be a necessary step toward addressing educational underperformance in inner-city schools (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Hanson & Voight, 2014). School safety is associated with a host of student outcomes, including academic achievement, health, and socio-emotional development (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Voight, Austin, & Hanson, 2013). Exposure to violence and criminal activity in school may induce fear and psychological stress that detract from student learning (Schreck & Miller, 2003). Disruptions from violence and crime can divert resources away from the classroom, reduce instructional time, and create disorderly school processes (Hanson & Voight, 2014; Ripsky & Gregogy, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006; Whitlock, 2006). Other influences may increase fear of victimization with detrimental consequences for student outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010;
Schreck & Miller, 2003). Chronic disciplinary problems, negative school climate, and poor structural conditions of school buildings have also been found to lower student perceptions of school safety (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Lacoe, 2015; Skiba et al., 2006; Tanner, 2000).

In cities with high crime rates, students routinely report greater violence and crime at school and during school commutes than students in other settings do (Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2013; Wiebe et al., 2013). Research further finds that African American students in inner cities report lower perceptions of safety than other students even when actual violence is taken into account (Lacoe, 2015). The school safety gap between students in inner cities and their peers in other locations represents a considerable disparity (Lacoe, 2015; Neiman & Hill, 2011). Neighborhood context is thought to be a critical factor (Harding, 2009; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Steinberg et al., 2011). Criminal activity in high crime neighborhoods may spread to school campuses and lead to victimization along student commutes (Lacoe, 2015; Schreck & Miller, 2003; Wilson et al., 2010). In distressed neighborhoods in deindustrialized cities, the combined effects of concentrated poverty, family dissolution, and other social problems may present complex challenges to maintaining a safe school environment (Sampson, 2012). Neighborhood blight and other forms of disorder prevalent in many deindustrialized cities may signal weak social control, lowering student perceptions of school safety (May & Dunaway, 2000; Schreck, 2010). Although schools may be able to act as a buffer against neighborhood crime and disorder, the effectiveness of many commonly used school safety strategies has been questioned (Fuller, 2009; Harding, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Skiba et al., 2003). For example, heavy
security and monitoring on school campuses as well as zero-tolerance policies mandating expulsion for offenses committed on school grounds may raise fear and deepen inequities for the most vulnerable students (Mowen, Brent, & Kupchik, 2016; Schreck & Miller, 2003). By contrast, other interventions focusing on positive school climate, restorative justice programs, mental health services, and community partnerships seem to have had more promising results (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015; Skiba et al., 2006; Steinberg et al., 2011).

**Expectations for Charter School Reform**

In deindustrialized cities, charter schools are expected to be responsive to local demands for safe schools (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Smith et al., 2011). From the outset of the charter school movement, scholars have vigorously debated whether charter schools can deliver on such promises (Budde, 1988; Fuller, 2009; Maranto & Ritter, 2014). Supporters of charter schools claim that competition for per-pupil funding will require charter schools to be responsive to local priorities, such as school safety concerns, in order to attract families (Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Miron, 2010). By operating independent of a school district, charter schools are further expected to have the flexibility to develop innovative school strategies that enable safe learning environments (Hess, 2001; Shober, Manna, & Witte, 2006; Teske et al., 2000; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrel, 2013). As an additional safeguard, regulators and authorizers are meant to ensure accountability for results by revoking a school’s charter for poor performance (Miron, 2010). Critics of charter schools, however, have predicted a divergent set of outcomes (Miron & Nelson, 2002). For opponents of charter schools,
Charter schools are anticipated to increase segregation by race and class (Jacobs, 2011; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Ritter et al., 2016). In high crime cities, families possessing financial and social resources are expected to congregate in safe havens, leading to neighborhood public schools becoming “dumping grounds” for students with the greatest educational needs (Buras, 2011; Cowen, 2010; Howell, 2004; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Charter schools may also respond to safety concerns in inequitable ways, using subtle practices to remove disruptive students and those prone to violent behavior while encouraging enrollment of students with high prior performance and highly involved families (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013).

**Charter and Public Schools on Safety**

A large body of research has investigated competing predictions for charter schools. Results have been mixed and contingent on state jurisdiction, geographic area, and charter school type (Berends, 2015; Berends et al., 2009; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Students in no-excuses charter schools in inner cities have exhibited the largest academic gains relative to their counterparts in public schools (Angrist et al., 2013; Berends, 2015; Betts & Tang, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). For school safety, some studies have indicated that charter schools create a safe learning environment through strict enforcement of rules, orderly facilities, administrative oversight, and high expectations for the school community (Angrist et al. 2013; Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Teske et al., 2000; Whitman, 2008). In what may be the only prior statistical comparison of charter and public schools on safety, Christensen (2007) conducted a national-level analysis using the 2006 Schools and Staffing Survey and found that school staff report
fewer safety problems in charter schools than in public schools. However, the results were mainly descriptive, lacking controls for demographic, neighborhood, and self-selection characteristics.

In considering student demographics, aggregated statistics show that charter schools disproportionately serve minority and economically disadvantaged students (Berends, 2015; Ritter et al., 2016; US Department of Education, 2015). Yet, comparisons of charter and public schools located within the same neighborhoods find similar distributions of students by race and social class (Jacobs, 2011; Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002; Ritter et al., 2016; Zimmer & Guarino, 2013). Within cities, flexibility in choice of location may confer an advantage to charter schools (Burdick-Will et al., 2013; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). In deindustrialized cities where neighborhood blight and crime are prevalent, the potential for charter schools to locate in orderly neighborhoods may help them to create positive perceptions of school safety and attract safety-oriented families (Bell, 2009; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). In Chicago, Burdick-Will et al. (2013) found that new charter schools without boundary restrictions tended to locate in gentrifying areas but those with missions to serve disadvantaged students located in the least affluent sections of the city. Gulosino and Lubienski (2011) examined locational strategies of charter schools in Metropolitan Detroit and reported that “mission-driven” charter schools tended to operate in high needs areas but that for-profit managed charter schools were more likely to establish in areas with a relatively higher socioeconomic profile.

Self-selection may be the most difficult obstacle to ensuring a valid comparison between charter and public schools (Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). In depressed cities where
a large proportion of families share a similar socio-demographic background, controls for race and class may not capture underlying differences between families who opt for a charter school and those who do not (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Fleming et al., 2015). School choosers may be more academically motivated, possess broader social networks, and have greater access to resources (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014). These preexisting attributes may then introduce bias when evaluating the performance of charter schools (Betts & Tang, 2014; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). One method for dealing with self-selection bias has been to use charter school lotteries to compare students winning admission to a charter school with those who do not win admission (Angrist et al., 2013; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). This quasi-experimental approach offers a relatively effective means of removing self-selection bias and tends to find a charter school performance advantage (Angrist et al., 2013; Betts & Tang, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). However, oversubscribed charter schools with sufficient demand to warrant a lottery may represent a class of higher performing charter schools (Tuttle, Gleason, & Clark, 2012; Zimmer & Guarino, 2011). Using only data from oversubscribed charter schools may then offer an incomplete assessment of charter schools (Betts & Tang, 2014; Tuttle et al., 2012).

**The Current Study**

In comparing charter and public schools in Detroit, Michigan, this study asks whether charter schools in deindustrialized cities exhibit higher perceived safety than public schools. The analyses in this work have several strengths that substantially improve on previous scholarship. Student surveys are used to examine perceived school
safety instead of reports on safety from school staff used in prior research (Christensen, 2007). While student reports remain subject to common limitations of survey research, school officials in competitive choice settings may overestimate school safety to present a positive image of their school, whereas students may not have such motivations when reporting on perceptions of school safety (Hoff, 2006). Student perceptions of school safety are also highly relevant, being associated with numerous student outcomes and measures of actual school violence and victimization on school grounds (Hanson & Voight, 2014; Ripsky & Gregogy, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006; Whitlock, 2006).

This study links together data from multiple sources to generate control variables for demographic, neighborhood, and parent-related selection characteristics. Neighborhood characteristics may be important with neighborhood crime and physical disorder being negatively related to perceived school safety (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Sampson, 2012; Schreck & Miller, 2003). As charter schools may have the flexibility to locate in neighborhoods with less crime and blight (Burdick-Will et al., 2013; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011), this study tests the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Relative to public schools, charter schools will exhibit a positive relationship with perceived school safety (see Christensen, 2007), but this relationship will decrease after controlling for neighborhood characteristics (major reported crime and structural vacancy rate).

In addition, in deindustrialized cities with high percentages of low-income African American families, controls for demographic factors may explain less about differences in student composition between schools than other within-group characteristics (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014).
This study uses controls for student commute distance and parental involvement to explore potential selection bias. In Detroit’s open enrollment system, transportation to a charter or public school outside of a student’s neighborhood is typically a family responsibility (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Lake et al., 2015). Charter schools largely do not provide transportation, and transportation for Detroit’s public schools is generally limited to students attending their assigned neighborhood schools (Bell, 2009; DPS Office of Transportation, 2015). School districts have also created large catchment areas and a complex school transportation network (Lake et al., 2015), in which secondary school students residing more than two miles from their assigned neighborhood schools are issued city bus passes (DPS Office of Transportation, 2015). Families who commute to public and charter schools of choice in Detroit may have access to transportation, high commitment, and other social resources (Bell, 2009; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Rose & Stein, 2014). These parental attributes may confer a self-selection advantage to charter schools in raising perceived school safety since the children of school choosers may be less likely to exhibit violent or disruptive behavior in school (Bell, 2009; Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Jones et al., 2009). Controlling for student commute distance may help to account for preexisting attributes of school choosers. Nevertheless, charter schools may still benefit from attracting the most motivated parents within a given neighborhood. Controlling for parental involvement may offer additional understanding. Schools that disproportionately attract highly motivated parents may be likely to report greater parental involvement (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Goldring & Philipps, 2008). To investigate these relationships, the following hypothesis is tested:
Hypothesis 2. After controlling for student commute distance and parental involvement, the relationship between charter schools and perceived school safety will decrease substantially, losing statistical significance.

Even though commute distance and parental involvement may be useful proxies for preexisting parental motivation and resources (Bell, 2009; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Jeynes, 2012), this study is unable to rule out other forms of selection bias. School choosers may possess advantages unaccounted by these two variables while other unobserved experiences or events triggering school selection may produce unaccounted for differences in student composition between schools (Fleming et al., 2014; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). Furthermore, an important limitation of these two variables is that they are likely to be interrelated with school characteristics. A school that is able to foster a perception that it is safe may induce motivated parents to travel longer distances and school approaches to parents may contribute to higher rates of parental involvement (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Smith et al., 2011). The precise mechanisms underlying commute distance and parental involvement are uncertain, limiting interpretation of results. Despite this constraint, the two variables may shed light on potential selection bias as well as activities performed by parents that are related to perceived school safety.

Data and Methods

Data Sources

Data were linked from four separate sources for the analyses in this study. For the dependent variable, student-reported survey data on perceived school safety administered
by the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute in both 2014 and 2015 were used. From the same survey administrations, student-reported bullying and teacher-reported parental involvement measures were obtained. The majority of the schools reporting on these measures were the same in 2014 and 2015 and all schools participating in the survey are located within the city limits of Detroit, Michigan. Survey data collected on the same schools in both years together with other continuous variables were averaged to enhance the reliability of results and improve statistical power (Magnuson et al., 2016). In merging these two years, 34 schools participating in only the 2015 survey and 15 schools participating in only the 2014 survey were included in the sample. A comparison of the final sample of schools to the total population of schools located in Detroit is presented in Table 3. The sample represents 74% of Detroit’s schools (59% of charter schools; 87% of public schools)\(^1\). Many of the schools not represented in the survey had a highly specialized focus. Among public schools not represented in the survey, there were three technical, two selective enrollment, one performing arts, and four special education schools. For charter schools, there were eighteen conventional schools, seven bilingual schools (Hispanic majority), five strict discipline schools, two personalized learning high schools\(^2\), one residential mental health school, one public services training school, one state turnaround school, one school for pregnant teenagers, and the only charter school in Detroit serving a predominantly Muslim student population. Charter schools not represented were demographically similar to charter schools in the sample although unrepresented charter schools had statistically higher rates of Hispanic students \(p < .05\). The omission of charter schools with larger proportions of Hispanic students reduces overall demographic variation and may increase the importance of controls for non-race
souces of variation. A final limitation of the sample is that it does not include suburban-located charter and public schools that serve high proportion of Detroit residents. Data on the variables of analysis for many of these suburban-located schools were not available. Potential for selection bias may be stronger in suburban charter and public schools as these schools are likely to enroll families with relatively greater financial and social resources as these would likely be needed for families to commute to schools outside of Detroit.

Table 3. Description of Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Pct. of Pop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec.(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Secondary includes two charter and two public schools with primary grades in sample.

School-level demographic data on race and economic disadvantage were compiled from the Michigan Department of Education’s Center for Educational Performance and Information. Major reported crimes occurring in Detroit from 2011 to 2014 were obtained from the Detroit Police Department. These data were matched to
schools to measure neighborhood crime by school location. Police reports of crimes committed on school grounds over the same period were also matched to schools. Finally, school-level student commute distances were obtained from Data Driven Detroit, a non-profit data analysis company that partnered with the Michigan Department of Education in 2013-2014 in determining school commute distances for Detroit’s students. Structural vacancy rates by census tract were obtained from Data Driven Detroit and mapped to schools in the sample (Data Driven Detroit, 2014). Table 4 provides a descriptive overview of the variables of analysis.

**Table 4. Descriptives for Variables (N = 150)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived school safety (std)</td>
<td>0 (1.00)</td>
<td>-1.88</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student demographics (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Amer.</td>
<td>87.70 (26.82)</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7.73 (22.25)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>94.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.56 (11.53)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>98.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. disadvantaged</td>
<td>82.24 (12.16)</td>
<td>15.79</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. crime (#)</td>
<td>293 (213)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. vacancy rate (%)</td>
<td>19.47 (12.16)</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>42.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime at school (#)</td>
<td>12.39 (15.90)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>66.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime at school (#)</td>
<td>2.52 (4.05)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying² (std)</td>
<td>0 (1.00)</td>
<td>-1.98</td>
<td>3.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (# students)</td>
<td>506 (217)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (# students)</td>
<td>579 (411)</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-related characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student commute distance:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (mi.)</td>
<td>2.73 (1.75)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>8.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (mi.)</td>
<td>4.58 (1.93)</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>9.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement (std)</td>
<td>0 (1.00)</td>
<td>-1.08</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

a Bullying is the only variable with missing data (n = 15).
b All figures reference school level
Dependent Variable

*Perceived school safety.* A measure of perceived school safety was comprised of five student-reported items on a four-point scale. The items were derived from the Five Essentials Framework, aggregated to the school level using Rasch Analysis, and standardized to facilitate interpretation of results (Bryk et al., 2010; Allensworth et al., 2006). Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived school safety. The five items include how safe students feel (not safe to very safe) outside/around the school, traveling between home and school, in the bathrooms of the school, in the hallways of the school, and in their classes. These in and out-of-school items represent components influencing student perceptions of safety but exclude other indicators that may affect safety perceptions, such as school climate (Skiba et al., 2006).

Independent variables

*School characteristics.* A dummy variable for charter schools was created using public schools as the reference category. Additional dummy variables were created for neighborhood charter, neighborhood public, commuter charter, and commuter public schools (process detailed under commute distance variable). Table 3 shows that there is a greater proportion of secondary public schools in the sample relative to secondary charter schools. With students in secondary grades reporting lower fear of victimization in school than those in primary grades, school level was a binary variable (primary and secondary) used to control for potential grade level differences in perceived school safety (Dauter & Fuller, 2016; Kann et al., 2013; Neiman & Hill, 2011; Schreck & Miller, 2003). A measure of general crime in school and a measure of violent crime (aggravated assault,
assault, weapons offense, and kidnapping) in school were analyzed. In Table 4, violent crime on school campuses ranges from zero to twenty-five incidents among schools in the sample. A student-reported measure of bullying was used to explore measures related to perceived school safety.

Demographics. The school percentage of African American, Hispanic, and students of other backgrounds (White, Asian, Native American) were recorded for each school in the sample. The percentage of low-income students eligible for free or reduced price lunch in a school was used as a proxy for economic disadvantage. Race and social class variation in the sample appear to be relatively minimal. In Table 4, 88% of students are African American and 82% are economically disadvantaged. Hispanic students constitute the second largest group in the sample, representing a possible source of racial variation (Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010).

Neighborhood characteristics. The number of major reported crimes within a scout car neighborhood were linked to schools in the sample. Scout car neighborhoods are demarcated for policing purposes and are approximately one square mile, comprising two to three census tracts (Bynum & McCluskey, 2007). Major reported crimes were homicide, robbery, larceny, burglary, stolen vehicle, and aggravated assault. Each major reported crime includes the type of crime that occurred, time and date that the crime was reported, and the address, census tract, and neighborhood where the crime occurred. As an indicator of non-crime neighborhood disorder, neighborhood structural vacancy rates were matched to schools in the sample using census tracts (Data Driven Detroit, 2014).
The measure for vacancy rate was created through an evaluation of the structural vacancy of all buildings in a census tract that were “likely” or “very likely vacant.”

*Commute distance.* Average student commute distances were linked to schools in the sample. Commute distance was also used to categorize charter and public schools into commuter and neighborhood schools. In Detroit’s high choice arena, there are public and charter schools that enroll large proportions of students who commute to school from outside of their neighborhoods as well as neighborhood public and charter schools that largely draw students from within the neighborhood in which a school is located. A commuter school was defined as a primary school with an average student commute distance of over 2.5 miles and a secondary school with an average student commute distance of over 3.5 miles. Neighborhood schools represented a primary school with an average student commute of 2.5 miles or less and a secondary school with an average student commute of 3.5 miles or less. These categories were developed in consultation with previous research (Schlossberg, Greene, Phillips, Johnson, & Parker, 2006). However, in Detroit’s open enrollment system, even neighborhood schools enroll students from outside of their catchment area, making average student commutes higher than what might be expected in cities without such extensive choice (Data Driven Detroit, 2014). With declining enrollments and large numbers of school closures in Detroit over the past twenty years, secondary schools tend to have longer commute distances than primary schools (Lake et al., 2015; DPS Office of Transportation, 2015). Table 4 shows that the minimum average student commute distance is 1.8 miles for secondary schools and 0.9 miles for primary schools in the sample. The average student commute distances
are 2.7 miles and 4.6 miles, respectively. The neighborhood and commuter categories were further cross-referenced against student dispersion maps indicating the percentage of students attending a school by census tract. In verifying the categorization strategy, all schools classified as neighborhood schools had the majority of their students residing in both the census tract location of the school or in contiguous census tracts. Table 3 shows that 73% \((n = 68)\) of public schools are neighborhood schools and 66% \((n = 42)\) of charter schools are commuter schools in the sample. Student commute distance also has a positive relationship with perceived school safety \((r = .30, p < .001)\).

**Parental involvement.** An indicator of parental involvement was generated from four teacher-reported items on a five-point Likert scale. Teachers reported the extent to which parents at a school volunteer their time to support the school, contact the teacher about their child’s performance, respond to the teacher’s suggestions for helping their child, and attend parent-teacher conferences. These in- and out-of-school measures of parental involvement were aggregated to the school level using Rasch Analysis and standardized to facilitate interpretation of results. Higher scores indicate higher levels of parental involvement. The indicator of parental involvement has a strong positive relationship with perceived school safety \((r = .57, p < .001)\). This relationship draws attention to a caveat. Namely, even though parental involvement may predict higher perceived school safety (Jones et al., 2009; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), an alternative possibility is that schools with higher perceived safety are able to elicit greater parental involvement. The data used in the analyses are unable to resolve this issue,
underscoring a need for cautious interpretation of the relationship between perceived school safety and parental involvement.

**Data Analysis**

To gain an initial understanding of perceived school safety, correlations were explored between perceived school safety and other indicators of in- and out-of-school safety. Following this step, independent t-tests were performed to examine differences between charter and public schools in the sample on perceived school safety, student demographics, school characteristics, neighborhood characteristics, student commute distance, and parental involvement. Multiple regression analyses were then conducted to examine perceived school safety differences between charter and public schools, net of controls. In Model 1, controls for economic disadvantage, percentage of Hispanic students, school level, neighborhood vacancy rate, and major reported neighborhood crime were included in the model. In Model 2, average student commute distance and parental involvement were added. To deepen the analyses, schools were then categorized using the commute distance variable. Four dummy variables were created, denoting neighborhood public, neighborhood charter, commuter public, and commuter charter schools. Independent t-tests were performed to compare charter and public schools categorized as neighborhood schools and to compare charter and public schools categorized as commuter schools on perceived school safety, student demographics, school characteristics, neighborhood characteristics, and student commute distance. To compare the four types of schools on perceived school safety, multiple regression analysis was conducted, controlling for the aforementioned variables and using neighborhood public schools as the reference category. The final step of the analysis
aimed to contextualize regression results for neighborhood charter and public schools where proximity to residence may have a greater role in determining what school a child attends (Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Each neighborhood public school reporting below average perceived school safety was compared to its nearest charter schools on perceived school safety. Conversely, each neighborhood charter school reporting below average perceived school safety was compared to its nearest public school on perceived school safety. For this small subset of schools, dispersion maps were used to locate schools and ascertain nearest distances.

**Results**

**Perceived School Safety**

Correlations for perceived school safety and other components of safety are presented in Table 5. Perceptions of school safety are associated with several measures of in-school safety. Less bullying is associated with higher rates of perceived school safety ($r = .75, p < .001$) while both reported crime in school ($r = -.34, p < .01$) and reported violent crime in school ($r = -.39, p < .01$) are negatively associated with perceived school safety. Conversely, neighborhood vacancy rate and major neighborhood reported crime have no statistical relationship with perceived school safety. For perceived school safety, in-school measures of safety are more salient than neighborhood measures, which may be important for determining school characteristics related to school safety perceptions.
Table 5. Correlations for Perceived School Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Perceived school safety (DV)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Neigh. crimes</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Vacancy rate</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bullying at school*</td>
<td>.75***</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Crime at school</td>
<td>-.34***</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Violent crime at school</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>-.28***</td>
<td>.86***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

a Higher figures for bullying indicate lower levels of bullying.

Comparison of Charter and Public Schools on Perceived School Safety

Table 6 presents the means, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences between charter and public schools on the variables of analysis. Charter schools report statistically higher perceived school safety than public schools ($p < .01$). This result is consistent with previous school safety comparisons between charter and public schools that do not use rigorous controls (Christensen, 2007). Public schools also show statistically higher rates of reported crime in school ($M = 19.17$, $SD = 16.58$, $p < .001$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 4.63$, $p < .001$) than charter schools on reported crime in school ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 5.49$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 0.95$). For both charter and public schools, the majority of students is African American and economically disadvantaged, but charter schools in the sample have a statistically higher percentage of African American ($p < .01$) and economically disadvantaged students ($p < .001$). Approximately 91% of charter school students are African American and 87% are economically disadvantaged compared to 86% and 79% in public schools. By contrast, public schools have a statistically larger proportion of Hispanic students ($p < .05$) in the sample. Based on student enrollment, there are no statistical differences in school size between charter and public schools at
primary and secondary levels. At the neighborhood level, charter schools are not located in areas with less major reported crime or lower rates of vacancy relative to the locations of public schools. The similarity between charter and public schools on major reported neighborhood crime and neighborhood vacancy rate is notable given that charter schools may be expected to locate in safer and more orderly areas than public schools (Bell, 2012). Both average student commute distance and parental involvement are statistically higher in charter schools. Charter primary schools ($M = 3.71, SD = 2.03, p < .001$), in particular, have statistically longer average commutes compared to those of public primary schools ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.12$). Charter school families appear to participate more frequently in their children’s education and to travel greater distances to school.
Table 6. Independent T-tests between Trad. Public and Charter Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Trad. Public Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Charter Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived school safety (DV)</td>
<td>-0.22 (1.03)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.89)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student demographics (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Amer.</td>
<td>85.60 (29.69)</td>
<td>91.05 (21.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10.63 (26.10)*</td>
<td>3.15 (13.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.78 (7.08)</td>
<td>5.81 (16.29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. disadvantaged</td>
<td>79.05 (12.39)</td>
<td>87.30 (9.94)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime at school (#)</td>
<td>19.17 (16.58)***</td>
<td>1.62 (5.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime at school (#)</td>
<td>3.87 (4.63)***</td>
<td>0.38 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-0.14 (1.00)</td>
<td>0.16 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (# students)</td>
<td>509 (184)</td>
<td>500 (257)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (# students)</td>
<td>582 (429)</td>
<td>573 (388)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. crime (#)</td>
<td>300 (201)</td>
<td>283 (232)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. vacancy rate (%)</td>
<td>20.45 (12.06)</td>
<td>17.93 (12.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-related characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student commute distance:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (mi.)</td>
<td>2.04 (1.12)</td>
<td>3.71 (2.03)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (mi.)</td>
<td>4.13 (1.75)</td>
<td>5.62 (1.97)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>-0.15 (0.93)</td>
<td>0.24 (1.07)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001
All figures reference school level

Table 7 presents the results of two regression models comparing charter and public schools on perceived school safety. In Model 1, the charter school coefficient ($B = 0.68, SE = 0.17, p < .001$) is positive and statistically significant, net of controls. The results exhibit a large association with charter schools scoring .68 of a standard deviation higher than public schools on perceived school safety. For the demographic variables, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students is not statistically significant, but the percentage of Hispanic students is positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$). The dummy variable for secondary schools is not statistically significant. The two neighborhood indicators, major reported crime and vacancy rate, are not statistically
significant. Whether public or charter, these two neighborhood indicators are unrelated to perceptions of school safety in the sample. Model 1 explains 14% of the variability in perceived school safety. In Model 2, student commute distance and parental involvement are added. Student commute distance ($B = 0.13, SE = 0.05, p < .05$) and parental involvement ($B = 0.53, SE = 0.08, p < .001$) reduce the charter school coefficient by 88% and it is no longer statistically significant. The coefficient for percentage of Hispanic students remains statistically significant ($p < .05$). Compared to Model 1, Model 2 explains a greater proportion of the variability in perceived school safety at 38%. In diminishing the relationship between charter schools and perceived school safety, the commute distance and parental involvement variables suggest that attributes of school choosers may be underlying higher perceived school safety in charter schools to some extent. It is worth reiterating that school characteristics also likely contribute to these relationships (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Preston et al., 2012).
Table 7. Regression Predicting Perceived School Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter Schoolb</td>
<td>0.68***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. Disadvantaged</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pct. Hispanic</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (dummy)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.46*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. Crime</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Commute (mi.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.53***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-1.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>.416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. $R^2$</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001
a Unstandardized coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses
b The reference category is public schools.

Comparison of Neighborhood and Commuter Public and Charter Schools

Table 8 compares the means, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences between public and charter schools categorized as neighborhood schools and public and charter schools categorized as commuter schools. For neighborhood schools, neighborhood charter schools report statistically higher perceived school safety than neighborhood public schools ($p < .05$). Neighborhood charter schools have a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students at 93% compared to 82% in neighborhood public schools ($p < .001$). Neighborhood public schools, however, report statistically higher reported crime in school ($M = 20.08, SD = 15.97, p < 0.001$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 4.28, SD = 4.92, p < .001$) compared to reported crime in school ($M = 4.32, SD = 9.12$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 0.84, SD$...
= 1.50) in neighborhood charter schools. There are no statistical differences between charter and schools for neighborhood crime, neighborhood vacancy rate, parental involvement, and student commute distance. For commuter schools, commuter charter schools report higher perceived school safety than commuter public schools, but this difference is not statistically significant. In commuter charter schools, 85% of students are economically disadvantaged whereas this percentage is 71% in commuter public schools ($p < .001$). Commuter public schools have statistically higher rates of reported crime in school ($M = 16.63$, $SD = 18.30$, $p < .001$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 3.57$, $p < .01$) compared rates of reported crime in school ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 0.57$) and reported violent crime in school ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.37$) in charter schools. There are no statistical differences between commuter charter and public schools for neighborhood crime, neighborhood vacancy rate, parental involvement, and student commute distance.
Table 8. Independent T-tests for Neighborhood and Commuter Schools by School Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Neighborhood Schools</th>
<th></th>
<th>Commuter Schools</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trad. Public</td>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Trad. Public</td>
<td>Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived school safety (DV)</td>
<td>-0.36 (0.96)</td>
<td>0.25 (1.06)*</td>
<td>0.19 (1.12)</td>
<td>0.34 (0.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student demographics (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Amer.</td>
<td>83.24 (32.35)</td>
<td>83.44 (31.77)</td>
<td>92.28 (19.41)</td>
<td>94.75 (12.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12.61 (28.01)</td>
<td>7.60 (22.11)</td>
<td>5.00 (19.10)</td>
<td>0.98 (3.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.15 (7.85)</td>
<td>8.96 (23.38)</td>
<td>2.71 (4.18)</td>
<td>4.27 (11.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. disadvantaged</td>
<td>81.96 (10.99)</td>
<td>92.64 (7.89)***</td>
<td>70.82 (12.67)</td>
<td>84.70 (9.88)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime at school (#)</td>
<td>20.08 (15.97)***</td>
<td>4.32 (9.12)</td>
<td>16.63 (18.30)***</td>
<td>0.31 (0.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent crime at school (#)</td>
<td>4.28 (4.92)***</td>
<td>0.84 (1.50)</td>
<td>2.71 (3.57)**</td>
<td>0.15 (0.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>-0.33 (0.96)</td>
<td>-0.01 (1.15)</td>
<td>0.48 (0.89)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (#)</td>
<td>537 (257)</td>
<td>495 (223)</td>
<td>506 (316)</td>
<td>523 (312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. crime (#)</td>
<td>311 (194)</td>
<td>356 (246)</td>
<td>271 (222)</td>
<td>247 (220)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. vacancy rate (%)</td>
<td>22.88 (11.76)</td>
<td>25.17 (11.91)</td>
<td>13.51 (10.26)</td>
<td>14.40 (10.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-related characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student commute distance:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (mi.)</td>
<td>1.66 (0.41)</td>
<td>1.86 (0.40)</td>
<td>3.95 (1.60)</td>
<td>4.75 (1.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (mi.)</td>
<td>2.79 (0.49)</td>
<td>2.96 (0.19)</td>
<td>5.36 (1.58)</td>
<td>6.21 (1.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement</td>
<td>-0.40 (0.77)</td>
<td>-0.32 (0.75)</td>
<td>0.56 (0.98)</td>
<td>0.51 (1.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, ***p<0.001

a All figures reference school level

Table 8 presents the results of two regression models with dummy variables for neighborhood charter, commuter charter, and commuter public schools. In Model 1, relative to neighborhood public schools, all three other types of schools exhibit a large positive association with perceived school safety, net of controls. Neighborhood charter (B = 0.70, SE = 0.25, p < .01) and commuter public schools (B = 0.66, SD = 0.25, p < .01) score nearly .70 of a standard deviation higher than neighborhood public schools while commuter charter schools (B = 0.89, SE = 0.20, p < .001) score nearly .90 of a standard deviation above neighborhood public schools. The percentage of Hispanic
students is the only other statistically significant variable in the model ($B = 0.2, SE = 0.01, p < .001$). Despite commuter charter and commuter public schools being located in areas with less major reported crime and lower vacancy rates, neither of these variables is statistically significant. Model 1 explains 17% of the variability in perceived school safety. In analyzing schools categorized by commute distance, it is unsurprising that commuter charter and public schools outperformed neighborhood public schools given the results for commute distance in the first set of regression models.

Model 2 includes a control for parental involvement. When accounting for parental involvement, the coefficients for both commuter charter ($B = 0.25, SE = 0.20$) and commuter public schools ($B = 0.25, SE = 0.20$) are reduced by 72% and 62% respectively, and are no longer statistically significant. The coefficient for neighborhood charter schools also drops by 29% but remains statistically significant ($B = 0.5, SE = 0.22, p < .05$) with neighborhood charter schools scoring .5 of a standard deviation higher than neighborhood public schools. In Model 2, the coefficient for Hispanic students is no longer statistically significant with the inclusion of the parental involvement variable. Higher perceptions of school safety reported in schools with larger numbers of Hispanic students appear to be positively related to rates of parental involvement. Model 2 explains 37% of the variability in perceived school safety. Considering the substantial decrease in the charter school coefficients, Model 2 suggests that higher perceived safety exhibited by commuter public and charter schools is related to parental involvement. By contrast, neighborhood charter schools exhibit higher perceived safety, net of parental involvement.
Table 9. Regression Predicting Perceived School Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. Charter</td>
<td>0.70**</td>
<td>0.50*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter Public</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.25)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter Charter</td>
<td>0.89***</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. Disadvantaged</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pct. Hispanic</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (dummy)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neigh. Crime</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Inv.(^c)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>-0.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.64)</td>
<td>(0.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{a}\) Unstandardized coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses
\(^{b}\) Neighborhood public schools is the reference category.

To examine this result further, Table 10 compares mean perceived school safety of neighborhood public schools reporting below average perceived school safety to that of the nearest charter schools as well as mean perceived school safety of neighborhood charter schools reporting below average perceived school safety to that of the nearest public schools. The closest alternative charter school for students in neighborhood public schools has, on average, much higher perceived school safety \((M = -0.03, SD = .65)\) than the neighborhood public schools \((M = -0.98, SD = 0.48)\). The closest alternative public schools for neighborhood charter school students report similar perceived school safety.
(M = -0.31, SD = 1.41 compared to M = -0.43, SD = 0.31). These additional findings could be indicative of school strategies being partly responsible for higher perceived school safety in neighborhood charter schools. However, this possibility is speculative since the analyses are based on a small subset of schools and are unable to rule out selection bias. Neighborhood charter schools may have higher perceived school safety as a result of attracting families with subtle advantages unaccounted for in these analyses (Fleming et al., 2015).

**Table 10. Neighborhood Schools Reporting Below Average Perceived School Safety**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood schools</th>
<th>Perceived school safety Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Perceived school safety at closest alternative Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Distance to closest alternative (mi) Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below avg. neigh. public schools (n = 32)</td>
<td>-0.98 (0.48)</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.26 (0.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below avg. neigh. charter schools (n = 12)</td>
<td>-0.43 (0.31)</td>
<td>-0.31 (1.41)</td>
<td>1.18 (0.36)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a – For neighborhood public schools, closest alternative refers to nearest charter schools. For neighborhood charter schools, closest alternative refers to nearest public schools. Eighteen of the closest charter schools were neighborhood charter schools. Eight of the closest public schools were neighborhood schools.

**Discussion**

This study compared charter and public schools on perceived school safety in a high crime deindustrialized city with extensive school choice. The analyses shed light on a priority for charter school reform on which little research has been done. Initial findings showed that public schools had higher reported crime in school, higher reported violent crime in school, and lower perceived school safety than charter schools. Charter schools as a whole exhibited a large positive association with perceived school safety, net of controls for student demographics, neighborhood crime, and neighborhood vacancy rate. However, when student commute distance and parental involvement were controlled, the positive relationship between charter schools and perceived school safety decreased
substantially, losing statistical significance. Analyses by school type demonstrated that neighborhood public schools also had lower perceived school safety than neighborhood charter, commuter charter, and commuter public schools. After controlling for parental involvement, all differences by school type decreased considerably and only neighborhood charter schools remained statistically higher on perceived school safety relative to neighborhood public schools.

The overall results showed that commute distance and parental involvement diminished the positive association between charter schools and perceived school safety. One interpretation of this finding is that once the attributes of school choosers are taken into consideration, differences in perceived school safety become much less prominent between charter and public schools. While the literature suggests that commute distance and parental involvement may be closely associated with preexisting parent attributes (Bell, 2009; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Jeynes, 2012; Rose & Stein, 2014), an important caveat to this interpretation is that commute distance and parental involvement are likely interrelated with characteristics of schools. To induce safety-oriented families to commute outside of their neighborhoods, for instance, schools of choice may at a minimum have to foster a perception that they are safe, possibly through advertising the school as a safe and orderly environment, adopting specific safety measures, and encouraging parent participation at school (Angrist et al. 2013; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). Rates of parental involvement in charter schools may also be driven by school approaches to parents and even influenced by perceptions of safety fostered by schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Bryk et al., 2010; Preston et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011). If commute distance and parental involvement are more reflective of school
characteristics than parent attributes, controlling for them would underestimate the relationship between perceived school safety and charter schools. As this study is unable to isolate the relative contribution of school and parent attributes to these variables, the results of this study are suggestive and require modest interpretation. Despite this limitation, whether driven by preexisting parent attributes or school strategies, the results do underscore a positive association between the activities of parents and perceived school safety.

Additionally, in classifying charter and public schools into commuter and neighborhood schools, commuter public schools seem to experience dynamics similar to those of charter schools. They attract families with the initiative to seek out a school and with the means to commute to schools outside of their neighborhood. Commuter public schools also exhibited higher perceived school safety relative to neighborhood public schools until parent involvement was controlled. Another notable finding was that only neighborhood charter schools maintained higher perceived school safety relative neighborhood public schools after controlling for parental involvement. Examination of a small subset of neighborhood public schools reporting below average perceived school safety showed that the nearest charter schools had, on average, higher perceived school safety. Given these results, a possibility is that neighborhood charter schools raise student perceptions of safety through school strategies, such as a highly-structured learning environment and strict enforcement of behavioral codes (Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Whitman, 2008; Zimmer & Gaurino, 2011). However, this interpretation is speculative since this study neither examines specific school safety strategies nor is it able to rule out unaccounted forms of selection bias. Families that apply to charter schools located in
their neighborhoods may have unobserved advantages, such as efficacious social networks and access to information, that bias the results in this study (Betts & Tang, 2014; Goldring & Philipps, 2008; Fleming et al., 2015). Similarly, if neighborhood charter schools use strict disciplinary measures, they may also experience relatively higher student attrition, producing differences in student composition that may further distort school comparisons of perceived school safety (Zimmer & Guarino, 2011).

Neighborhood Crime and Vacancy Rate. Much research has demonstrated a negative relationship between neighborhood crime and blight and perceived school safety (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Sampson, 2012; Schreck & Miller, 2003). In this study, neighborhood crime and structural vacancy rate were unrelated to perceived school safety. Several reasons may explain the absence of this relationship. First, high rates of crime and vacancy are pervasive throughout Detroit and may be more uniform across neighborhoods than in other US cities (Raleigh & Galster, 2015). Very few neighborhoods exist in Detroit that have low crime and low physical disorder within which schools might locate and even relatively safer neighborhoods are often adjacent to areas with high rates of crime and urban decay (Detroit Residential Parcel Survey, 2010; Raleigh & Galster, 2015). Second, families who opt for a school outside of their neighborhood are responsible for transportation to and from school (Raleigh & Galster, 2015). This situation may lessen the effects of neighborhood factors on perceptions of school safety as commuting students may have less exposure to the neighborhood surrounding their school (Wilson et al, 2010). Third, charter schools in the suburbs outside of Detroit serve 17,000 students who reside within Detroit (CEPI, 2014). In these
suburban schools, prior research suggests that the relationship between neighborhood crime and disorder and perceived school safety may be stronger (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011) and resemble patterns that tend to be observed within cities, such as Chicago (Burick-Will et al., 2013).

**Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research**

The gap in perceived school safety between students in inner-city schools and those in other settings represents an educational disparity of considerable importance (Eaton et al., 2012; Lacoe, 2015; Kann et al., 2013). In deindustrialized cities with high crime rates, parents’ perceptions of school safety seem to take precedence in school choice decisions over many other indicators of school performance (Friedman Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; Stewart & Wolf, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010). Yet, this process of safety-seeking through school choice may highlight parental sorting mechanisms should more committed and well-resourced families be capable of seeking out schools of choice (Goldring & Philipps, 2008). As safety-seeking families depart neighborhood public schools, perceptions of school safety may rise in the schools that they choose while possibly leaving neighborhood public schools to educate students with fewer home advantages and greater behavioral problems (Buras, 2011; Cowen, 2010; Howell, 2004). Such processes may indicate that school choice reforms in distressed cities offer little benefit to the most vulnerable students. On the other hand, families have long opted for private, Catholic, and selective enrollment public schools of choice in inner cities (Bell, 2009; Bauch & Goldring, 1995). Charter school reforms may then have expanded school options for economically disadvantaged African American families who
might otherwise have not had access to other educational alternatives. Among these families, there is also much within-group variation in school choice participation (Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Clearer understanding of the factors underlying these within-group differences may help to demonstrate ways to improve the fairness of school choice. In Detroit, a common enrollment system has recently been rolled out for the city’s charter schools that may help to create a fairer school selection process (Gross, DeArmond, & Denice, 2015). Nonetheless, access to transportation and reliable information may be greater needs for bridging gaps among families (Lake et al., 2015; Stewart & Wolf, 2012).

Alongside school choice policies, schools in cities with high crime rates have undertaken various strategies to improve school safety. Since 2010, Detroit Public Schools has created school safety hubs, increased security and monitoring, and initiated volunteer patrols along student commutes (Detroit Public Schools, 2013). Such initiatives may affect students’ perceptions of safety in different ways (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015; Skiba et al., 2006). Although the effects of specific initiatives on perceived school safety are not examined in this study, the observed relationship between parental involvement and perceived school safety may have implications for improving students’ perceptions of school safety (Jones et al., 2009; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004). Some evidence indicates that school-led initiatives that increase the presence of parents at school raise student perceptions of safety while parenting supports from schools may lead to improved student behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Whether these school-led parental involvement strategies are able to enhance perceived school safety in challenging school environments is a question for
further study. Future inquiry might also expand on the results of this study by investigating specific safety strategies used in charter and public schools and how differences in strategies may relate to perceived school safety. Some of these questions are addressed using qualitative methods in Chapter 4.
Chapter 3

Parental involvement in high choice deindustrialized cities:
   A comparison of charter and public schools in Detroit
We have a high parental involvement rate. [Parents] are more likely to come to parent-teacher conferences, open house, social studies nights, and parent events. But those events that we have high attendance at are not forums for parents to decide curriculum or grading plans or things that in other traditional public schools, parents are able to weigh in on.

Teacher, Non-profit managed charter school

Introduction

In deindustrialized cities, schools operate in environments characterized by high rates of crime, unemployment, family dissolution, population loss, and physical decay (Solomon, 2013; Sugrue, 2014). These complex social and economic challenges have long contributed to low student outcomes (Wilson, 1996). Seeking to address educational underperformance in impoverished deindustrialized cities, reformers have undertaken a vast array of school improvement initiatives (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Dworkin, 2005). Parental involvement and school choice represent two of the most prominent such strategies promoted in these cities over the past 20 years (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Robinson & Harris, 2014). Stemming from decades of research linking parental involvement to a wide range of student outcomes (Hill et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2005), federal, state, and local policies have emphasized parental involvement as key to closing achievement gaps in inner cities (Epstein, 2010; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001).

However, low-income and minority families in inner cities tend to encounter persistent barriers to parental involvement (Lareau, 2003; Robinson & Harris, 2014; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). In rapidly advancing across deindustrialized cities, charter school reform has been touted as a way to empower families, break down barriers to parent participation, and generate improved performance in challenging school settings (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011).
A forerunner in the charter school movement, the city of Detroit, Michigan, currently has the second highest proportion of students enrolled in charter schools in an urban district with nearly half of the city’s students attending a charter school (Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information [CEPI], 2014; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools [NAPCS], 2014). Detroit is also emblematic of the social shifts experienced by deindustrialized cities, where the charter school movement has proliferated. It has undergone decades of steady manufacturing decline coupled with large-scale White flight to the suburbs (Mirel, 1999). Detroit’s population has plummeted from nearly two million in the 1950s to below 700,000 today as crime, poverty, and physical disrepair have dramatically risen over the same period (Mirel, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The public education system reflects the city’s struggles. Eighty-three percent of Detroit’s students are African American with 57% living below the poverty line (Stewart & Wolf, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

In the city’s open enrollment system, neighborhood charter and public schools tend to serve students who primarily live in the neighborhood surrounding the school. These neighborhood schools comprise the city’s lowest performing schools, such as state-controlled “turnaround” public and charter schools. There are also “commuter” public and charter schools that draw students from all over the city and constitute the city’s high-performing selective enrollment and magnet public schools as well as many of the city’s highest performing charter schools. Both for-profit and non-profit management organizations operate charter schools while Detroit Public Schools, the city’s traditional school district, has diversified the managerial structures of some of its schools by authorizing self-governing and district charter schools. Many charter and public schools in the city have a special focus that
includes schools with performing arts, aeronautical, Africentric, technical, and strict discipline themes. Even though school options have expanded, Detroit’s students have consistently ranked among the lowest performing for test scores and graduation rates (Council of Great City Schools, 2008). Primary and secondary school parents cite parental involvement as central to improving Detroit’s schools but point to home–school communication barriers and a lack of school support as impediments to parent participation (Excellent Schools Detroit, 2010; Lake, Jochim, & DeArmond, 2015).

School choice advocates argue that through increased autonomy and competition, charter schools are able to adapt to specific parent needs, reflect local values, and develop innovative strategies for engaging parents who face barriers to being involved (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Drake, 2000; Nathan, 1996). Although a small number of studies suggest that charter schools elicit higher rates of parental involvement than public schools (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006), an important limitation of previous work is that it does not distinguish among different types of charter schools. Nonetheless, differentiating among charter schools with varying models and managerial arrangements may be important for evaluating rates of parent participation in charter schools (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). Charter schools operated by nonprofit community organizations, for instance, appear to value community-centered approaches to school improvement, possibly giving them an advantage over their for-profit managed peers in spurring parental involvement (Brown, Henig, Lacireno-Paquet, & Holyoke, 2004).

Parents are also hypothetically empowered by choice and considered more likely to participate in a school that they have selected (Buckley & Schneider, 2009). Yet, parents who opt for a charter school may be more academically committed than those who do not (Davies,
This potential for self-selection bias presents a methodological challenge when attempting to ascertain whether charter schools elicit greater parental involvement through school mechanisms or whether they benefit from attracting more academically motivated parents than public schools do (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014). In deindustrialized inner cities with less demographic variation, commonly used controls for race and social class may be ineffective in accounting for selection bias (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Previous work indicates that a combination of institutional and self-selection factors help charter schools achieve higher rates of parental involvement than public schools but is limited by a lack of controls for parent characteristics that may bias school effects on parental involvement (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). Controls for parent characteristics may considerably diminish charter school effects on parental involvement (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011).

This study compares parental involvement between for-profit managed and non-profit managed charter schools and their public school counterparts in Detroit, using teacher-reported survey data administered by the Urban Education Institute at Chicago. A general measure of parental involvement based on parent–teacher communication, parent volunteering, and home-based learning is analyzed along with a measure of parent decision-making and leadership. Although not exhaustive measures of parental involvement across school levels and demographic contexts (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Wang, Hill, & Hofkens, 2014), these items largely map onto Epstein’s (2010) widely used six-point typology of parental involvement (e.g., communicating, volunteering, decision-making, learning at home, collaborating with community, and parenting). The analyses in this study substantially improve upon prior methodological approaches by
integrating data from three sources and generating rigorous controls for demographic and school characteristics. Student commute distance is used as a proxy for the self-selection of academically committed parents into charter schools. With relatively minimal race and social class variation in Detroit, commute distance serves as a control for within-group advantages of school choosers. By comparing charter and public schools on parental involvement, this study offers an important evaluation of one of the main priorities of charter school reform in challenging deindustrialized city settings. In addition, this work may shed light on variability among low-income African American families who are often discussed as a uniform group in debates on whether families living in depressed cities benefit from school choice or are left behind by it.

The Effects of Parental Involvement on Student Outcomes

An expansive body of scholarship demonstrates the advantages of parental involvement for low-income minority students in urban areas (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005, 2012). However, parental involvement comprises different activities with varying effects on student success. In describing parental involvement, researchers and policy makers have tended to employ Epstein’s (2010) six-point typology, which consists of parenting, learning at home, volunteering, parent decision-making, communication, and collaborating with community. The typology has been criticized for downplaying subtle forms of parenting (Jeynes, 2012), lacking attentiveness to social and cultural factors (Auerbach, 2007; Baquedano et al., 2013), and treating forms of parental involvement as static across different phases of primary and secondary school (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015). Other models have been proposed that attempt to address these
criticisms (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016), but much previous research has relied on Epstein’s model as a broad conceptual lens for parental involvement (Jeynes, 2012).

Within Epstein’s categories of parental involvement, studies have shown that aspects of parenting, such as parental expectations and parenting style, exhibit large effects on academic achievement during primary and secondary school and across social class and racial groups (Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Conversely, specific forms of learning at home, such as parent–child shared reading, show large effects on student outcomes that are largely relevant for early primary school (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). Even though home-based forms of parental involvement related to parenting and learning at home have shown the largest effects on student achievement, school-based forms of parental involvement (e.g., volunteering at a school function, participating in leadership roles on parent–teacher associations) demonstrate minimal effects on student achievement (Jeynes, 2012).

Some school-initiated parental involvement programs have demonstrated positive results on student achievement and behavioral outcomes (Jeynes, 2012; Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Studies of these school-initiated parental involvement programs primarily focus on primary grades and include school-initiated parent–child reading programs and strategies for improving parent–teacher communication (Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, & Yildirim, 2015; Darling & Westberg, 2004; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). In a meta-analysis of 51 studies, Jeynes (2012) found that primary and secondary school parental involvement programs in urban areas were associated with higher student outcomes overall and that parent–child shared reading, communication between parents and teachers, and parent–teacher partnerships produced the largest effects on student achievement.
Barriers to Parental Involvement in Urban Settings

Although the advantages of parental involvement are well documented, a parallel body of research indicates that minority and low-income parents frequently encounter obstacles to parental involvement (Williams & Sánchez, 2012). Commonly reported barriers include time and resource constraints, family composition, and a lack of familiarity with the school system (Ballenger, 2009; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015; Shiffman, 2013). Cultural and social class differences may produce additional obstacles by creating a mismatch between how schools and parents define parental involvement (Ballenger, 2009; Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). School level may pose other barriers to parental involvement with secondary schools not only being larger and more complex but also placing less emphasis on parental involvement than primary schools do (Epstein, 2010). Evolving needs related to social-emotional health and postsecondary transitions seem to add complexity to parental involvement during adolescence (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). African American parents with secondary school children appear to face considerable barriers to school-based parental involvement (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Williams & Sánchez, 2012).

To enable parent participation in inner cities, prior research describes various strategies for engaging families, such as parent–parent support groups, parenting workshops, and the use of multiple channels for home–school communication (Hands, 2013; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). Community-based partnerships appear to be effective at enhancing parental involvement when schools seek input from community agencies on the design of parental involvement programs or facilitate connections between parents and community services (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Rah, Choi, & Nguyễn, 2009; J. G.
Smith, 2006; Williams & Sánchez, 2012). To expand participation in school decision-making among low-income minority families, Baquedano et al. (2013) propose training parents on the operation of a school and on how to participate in school governance. During secondary grades, evidence further suggests that parent–child communication, social-emotional well-being, and “academic socialization” may be more developmentally suitable areas of focus for spurring parental involvement (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Wang et al., 2014).

**Expectations for Parental Involvement through School Choice**

Proponents of charter schools argue that school choice will help to diminish persistent barriers to parent participation in inner cities through competition and autonomy (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000). Charter schools are expected to be more responsive to parents’ needs than their public school peers because they receive funding on a per-pupil basis and must compete for students in the local marketplace (Miron, 2010). Charter schools are thought to compete for families by reflecting local values and addressing specific needs (Hess, 2001). In theory, these dynamics allow charter schools to break down barriers that parents face to be involved in their children’s education (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Tieken, 2009). Some empirical research reports that schools of choice tend to place emphasis on being responsive to parents (Davies & Quirke, 2007), but other work finds that charter schools struggle with many of the same challenges to parental involvement faced by public schools (Becker et al., 1997; Fuller, 2009).

Reformers further claim that independence from a central district authority allows charter schools to develop innovative strategies for engaging parents (Nathan, 1996; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Purportedly, operational flexibility derived from
greater autonomy allows for experimenting with administrative structures, systems of
governance, and school strategies that enable parental involvement (Nathan, 1996; Teske et
al., 2000). In exploring these theoretical claims, Smith et al. (2011) examined parental
involvement strategies in 12 urban charter schools in six states. The authors reported that
charter schools’ parental involvement initiatives generally followed Epstein’s typology of
parental involvement, but noted that charter schools used innovative approaches for engaging
parents, such as home visits, incentives for parent attendance, and parent contracts requiring
volunteer service from parents.

By devolving authority to schools and local communities through charter schools,
parent leadership in schools is also predicted to increase. A number of state charter school
laws stress the role of parents in establishing and governing charter schools (Buckley &
Schneider, 2009), and several state laws even require parents to sit on a charter school’s
board of directors (Smith et al., 2011). In spite of aspirations for an expanded role for parent
leadership in schools, uncertainty exists as to whether charter schools are actually able to
increase parent leadership. Many public schools have long-standing formalized structures in
place (e.g., parent councils and parent–teacher associations) that may provide channels for
parent leadership and input on school governance. Charter schools may even eschew parent
decision making. In charter schools in challenging inner-city areas, Whitman (2008) reported
that charter schools sought to reduce the influence of parents in school to inculcate middle-
class values and behaviors—a phenomenon dubbed the New Paternalism. However, relative
to public schools, charter schools tend to be smaller, potentially allowing them to promote
parent leadership in schools (Mowen, 2013). Smith et al. (2011) found that urban charter
schools frequently involved parents in school decisions. The authors identified instances in
which parents determined a school’s governing board by electing its officers directly and reported that charter schools provided leadership training to parents.

**Estimation Bias Arising from Self-Selection**

An inherent component of school choice is self-selection, in which parent-initiated decisions largely drive student enrollment in a charter school (Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012). Critics of school choice have warned that self-selection processes may lead to ethnic enclaves, White flight, and sorting by race and class (Levin, 1998; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). Charter schools might also “cream skim,” enrolling only middle-class students with highly involved parents (Levin, 1998). Opponents of school choice theorize that as advantaged parents congregate in schools of choice, public schools will eventually become “dumping grounds” for economically disadvantaged, minority, and special education students (Berlin & Biddle, 1995; Buras, 2011; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). In evaluating these predictions, scholarship on student composition in charter schools presents a more nuanced situation. Charter schools tend to serve higher percentages of minority and economically disadvantaged students than public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) but tend to be slightly more segregated (Bifulco & Ladd, 2007; Garcia, 2008; Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & McGee, 2010). Such differences may be partially attributable to a charter school focus on serving disadvantaged minority populations (Burdick-Will, Keels, & Schuble, 2013).

Even though the predictions of charter school skeptics may not have occurred as anticipated, self-selection processes pose crucial considerations when comparing differences in parental involvement between charter and public schools. Parents who seek out a school of
choice for their children are more likely to hold higher expectations for their children and to participate in the children’s education at higher rates (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Stein, Goldring, & Smrekar, 2012). Using national-level data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) attempted to account for self-selection in comparing parental involvement between charter and public schools. The authors used controls for school autonomy and racial and socioeconomic homogeneity, and then hypothesized that an undetermined portion of remaining charter school effects pertained to self-selection. They concluded that charter schools exhibited higher parental involvement because of both institutional factors that generated increased parent participation and self-selection effects.

Bifulco and Ladd’s (2006) work is one of the most thorough comparisons of charter and public schools on parental involvement, but a limitation of the authors’ results is the absence of a control for unobserved parent characteristics. For charter schools serving large percentages of low-income African American students in inner cities, controls for racial and social economic homogeneity may be ineffective because such settings tend to have relatively minimal racial and social class variation (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Bifulco and Ladd’s (2006) analyses may be further hampered by the use of self-reports from principals as a single informant on parental involvement in a school. In high choice environments, principals may experience competitive pressures and have a disincentive for reporting on school activities accurately as perceptions of school effectiveness may influence student enrollments (Hoff, 2006; Jabbar, 2015).
The Influence of Charter School Type on Parental Involvement

A general limitation of previous studies comparing charter and public schools is that they tend to treat charter schools as a uniform group (Brown et al., 2004). Charter schools constitute a diverse amalgam of schools with different missions, governance models, curricula, and approaches to parents (Fuller, 2009; Smith et al., 2011; Stein et al., 2012). In differentiating among charter schools, Brown et al. (2004) find that affiliations with management organizations lead to important distinctions. Charter schools founded by non-profit management organizations, such as social service organizations, educators, community, parent, and business groups, tend to be smaller and have different stated missions than schools founded by for-profit management organizations (Brown et al., 2004; Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005). Non-profit groups managing charter schools are also more likely to have offices in the communities that they serve than their for-profit counterparts (Miron, Urschel, Aguilar, Mayra, & Dailey, 2012). Compared with for-profit managed charter schools, non-profit managed charter schools appear more likely to target high-needs populations and to stress community-centered approaches to school improvement (Brown et al., 2004). These factors may allow non-profit managed charter schools to induce parental involvement by diminishing barriers to parent participation to a greater degree than for-profit managed schools. Similarly, other special focus charter schools may experience higher levels of parental involvement than conventional “back to basics” or college preparatory charter schools by benefitting from closer alignment between parent desires and specific school strategies (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Buckley & Schneider, 2009).
Research Questions and Hypotheses

In comparing charter and public schools on parental involvement, this study poses the following question: Do non-profit managed and for-profit managed charter schools generate higher rates of parental involvement than their public school counterparts? Parental involvement is measured using a general indicator of parental involvement that includes home–school communication, volunteering, and learning at home, and an indicator of parent decision-making and leadership in schools. The items constituting these two indicators largely map onto Epstein’s (2010) widely used six-point parental involvement typology. To generate controls for demographic, school, and self-selection factors, this study integrates school-level data from three separate sources. Given the relative lack of variation in race and class in Detroit, within-group controls are needed to account for differences among parents that might bias results. As a proxy for self-selection, student commute distance is a highly useful control because transportation to both charter and public schools outside of a student’s surrounding neighborhood tends to be a family responsibility in Detroit’s open enrollment system (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). Families who commute to charter and public schools outside of their neighborhood may be more academically inclined, have broader social networks, and have greater access to transportation than families in neighborhood schools (Burdick-Will et al., 2013; Garcia, 2008; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). These preexisting characteristics may be related to greater participation and bias results if not controlled (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). As a control, commute distance has the potential to reduce self-selection bias and enhance the validity of results comparing charter and public schools.

Based on findings from previous studies, this study hypothesizes that charter schools will exhibit higher rates of parental involvement than their public school counterparts. Non-
profit managed charter schools, in particular, are likely to exhibit high rates of parental involvement. However, it is expected that the self-selection of academically committed or well-resourced families into charter schools will account for this relationship to a large degree. As a result, after controlling for commute distance, it is hypothesized that schools with high average commute distances (2.5 miles or more) will diminish the relationship between charter schools and parental involvement. For parent decision-making, part of the rationale for charter school reforms in inner cities is to spur parent leadership and governance, but many public schools have formalized structures for parent leadership that may not exist in charter schools. As a result, no statistically significant differences between charter and public schools are expected for parent decision-making.

_Hypothesis 1._ Charter schools will elicit greater general parental involvement than public schools, net of student demographic composition and school factors. However, student commute distance will reduce this relationship.

_Hypothesis 2._ Non-profit managed charter schools will elicit greater general parental involvement than public schools, net of student demographic composition, school factors, and commute distance.

_Hypothesis 3._ No difference in parent decision-making will be observed between charter and public schools, net of commute distance.
Methods

Data Sources

Data were combined from three sources. First, school-level demographic data, test scores, student enrollment figures, and information on educational management organizations were compiled from the Michigan Department of Education. Second, school-level student commute distances were obtained from Data Driven Detroit, a nonprofit data analysis company that partnered with the Michigan Department of Education for its investigation of student commutes (Data Driven Detroit, 2014). Third, teacher-reported parental involvement survey data were obtained from surveys administered by University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute. The measures of parental involvement in the survey were derived from the Five Essentials Framework (Bryk et al., 2010). Scores for the two measures of parental involvement (four teacher-reported items for general parental involvement; five teacher-reported items for parent decision-making) were aggregated to the school level and benchmarked against the city of Chicago’s primary and secondary schools. The measures were developed using Rasch analysis. In generating a raw score for each individual response, Rasch analysis considers missing data and responses that are not reliable. To produce school-level scores, individual responses were weighted by the inverse of the standard error so that individual responses that are less reliable or have missing data receive less weight when school-level scores are generated (Urban Education Institute, 2014).

An overview of the composition of the sample is presented in Table 11. The sample provides a high degree of coverage of Detroit’s public and charter schools. A total of 153 schools participated in the survey, covering 75% of Detroit’s charter and public school
population and comprising approximately 94% of public schools and 55% of charter schools. Average response rates from teachers within schools were 78% for charter schools (min = 50%, max = 100%) and 78% for public schools (min = 51%, max = 100%). Among nonresponding schools, special education public schools did not participate. In addition, district-authorized mental health, strict discipline charter schools, and a group of five high-performing charter schools that primarily serve Hispanic students did not participate in the survey. As specialized schools may be subject to selection bias, this study’s sample may underestimate selection effects by excluding responses from mental health and strict discipline schools. Furthermore, the exclusion of schools with a high proportion of Hispanic students reduces racial variation in the sample, potentially increasing the importance of controls, non-race sources of variation. An additional limitation of the sample is that it does not include suburban-located charter and public schools that serve high proportion of Detroit residents. Data on the variables of analysis for many of these suburban-located schools were not available. Potential for selection bias may be stronger in suburban charter and public schools as these schools are likely to enroll families with relatively greater financial and social resources as these would likely be needed for families to commute to schools outside of Detroit.

**Table 11.** Characteristics of Public and Charter Schools in Sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Public (n = 99; %)</th>
<th>Charter (n = 54; %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventional focus</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special focus</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary(^{a})</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuter</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit managed</td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit managed</td>
<td></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{a}\)Secondary includes five schools with primary grades.
**Dependent Variables**

*General parental involvement.* A general indicator of parental involvement was generated from four teacher-reported items. The items survey parent-teacher communication, parent volunteering and participation in school, and learning at home using a five-point Likert-type scale. These items were aggregated to the school level using Rasch analysis. Higher scores indicate higher levels of parental involvement at a school.

*Parent decision-making.* An indicator of parent decision-making was generated from five teacher-reported items on what the school does to support parent leadership and school decision-making. The items inquire about parent leadership opportunities, parent participation in school curriculum, and parent-initiated leadership using a five-point Likert-type scale. The items were aggregated to the school level using Rasch analysis. Higher scores indicate higher levels of parent decision-making at a school.

**Independent Variables**

*Charter schools.* Charter schools were categorized as for-profit managed and non-profit managed. Public schools were used as the reference category in analyses.

*Demographics.* School-level demographic data for African American, Hispanic, and students of Other backgrounds (White, Asian, Native American) represented percentages of each group in a school. The predictor for economically disadvantaged students measured the percentage of low-income students eligible for free or reduced price lunch at a school. Approximately, 75% of schools in the sample have 75% or more of their student population classified as economically disadvantaged (min = 13%, max = 100%).

*School level.* School level was a binary variable for primary (K-8) and secondary (9-12)*
schools. In regression analyses, primary schools are the reference category. Student enrollment figures were also compared. School-level scores for general parental involvement and parent decision-making were generated by benchmarking Detroit’s primary schools against primary schools in Chicago and by benchmarking Detroit’s secondary schools against Chicago’s secondary schools. Given this approach for generating school-level scores, differences between primary and secondary schools on the dependent variables may not represent differences between these two school levels.

*Special focus.* Schools were categorized as either conventional or special focus. To classify schools, the researcher used Excellent Schools Detroit’s online profiles of Detroit’s schools, and cross-referenced school profiles by examining individual school websites. Examples of special focus schools were Africentric, aeronautical, performance art, and foreign language schools. Conventional schools comprised public schools along with “back to basics” and college preparatory schools.

*Commute.* Average student commute distances for schools were obtained using enrollment data and census block codes for student residence locations (Data Driven Detroit, 2014). The researcher linked these data to schools in the sample. Commute distance was used to categorize commuter and neighborhood schools. Using a previously used cutoff of 2.5 miles (Schlossberg, Greene, Phillips, Johnson, & Parker, 2006), a commuter school represented any public or charter school with an average student commute distance of more than 2.5 miles, while a neighborhood school was a charter and public school with average student commutes of 2.5 miles or less.
Data Analysis

Analyzing survey data collected in 2015, a descriptive analysis was first conducted across school-level indicators. To compare charter and public schools on each of these indicators, t tests were performed. Multiple regression analyses were then done to examine statistical differences in general parental involvement and parent decision-making among for-profit managed charter schools, non-profit managed charter schools, and public schools. The sample size necessitated parsimonious models using only the most relevant predictors. For this reason, school size was removed as a control variable. In the regression models, for-profit- and non-profit managed charter school dummy variables were first introduced and followed by control variables for demographic, school, and self-selection factors. Four models were run for both general parental involvement and parent decision-making.

Results

Table 12 presents the means, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences between charter and public schools, conventional and special focus schools, and neighborhood and commuter schools. For the general parental involvement dependent variable, charter schools, special focus schools, and commuter schools all report statistically higher parental involvement. For parent decision-making, public schools and special focus schools report statistically higher parent decision-making. The majority of students across schools is African American and economically disadvantaged, although charter schools enroll a statistically larger percentage of economically disadvantaged students than public schools. Student enrollments between primary and secondary public and charter schools are not statistically different and are similar across different types of schools. Even though special focus schools show statistically higher rates of general parental involvement, parent
decision-making, and parent–teacher trust than conventional schools, they also have statistically longer commute distances than their conventional peers, pointing to possible selection bias in schools with a special focus. Table 13 presents the means, standard deviations, and statistically significant differences between for-profit managed and non-profit managed charter schools, conventional and special focus charter schools, and neighborhood and commuter charter schools. For parental involvement and parent decision-making, non-profit managed charter school exhibit statistically higher parental involvement. Nonprofit- and for-profit managed charter schools differ little in student composition. For-profit charter schools enroll a statistically higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students while nonprofit charter schools report statistically longer commute distances.
### Table 12. Independent T-Tests by School Type.\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Special focus</th>
<th>Commute type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public (M (SD))</td>
<td>Charter (M (SD))</td>
<td>Conventional (M (SD))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent inv.</td>
<td>18.09 (19.34)</td>
<td>26.26* (20.44)</td>
<td>18.10 (19.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent decision-</td>
<td>56.08*** (18.09)</td>
<td>44.19 (20.63)</td>
<td>48.12 (19.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent–tchr trust</td>
<td>52.83 (20.07)</td>
<td>50.83 (19.92)</td>
<td>49.70 (19.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>85.96 (28.72)</td>
<td>90.84 (22.13)</td>
<td>88.39 (26.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10.15* (25.41)</td>
<td>3.5 (14.49)</td>
<td>7.21 (21.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.40 (7.06)</td>
<td>5.66 (16.79)</td>
<td>4.40 (11.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. Disadv.</td>
<td>77.54 (13.30)</td>
<td>86.61*** (10.90)</td>
<td>83.03** (11.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (#)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>493 (187)</td>
<td>518 (228)</td>
<td>508 (180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary(^b)</td>
<td>625 (538)</td>
<td>580 (371)</td>
<td>631 (380)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute (mi.)</td>
<td>2.80 (1.83)</td>
<td>4.16*** (2.16)</td>
<td>2.71 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT (sec.)(^c)</td>
<td>15.10 (1.97)</td>
<td>16.77 (0.94)</td>
<td>14.71 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math &amp; Read</td>
<td>11.16 (9.93)</td>
<td>15.46* (10.23)</td>
<td>12.52 (9.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-year math</td>
<td>11.67 (11.30)</td>
<td>18.09** (12.30)</td>
<td>13.56 (11.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-year reading</td>
<td>27.75 (17.67)</td>
<td>34.75* (16.08)</td>
<td>30.34 (16.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) All figures refer to school level.
\(^b\) Includes five schools with primary grades.
\(^c\) The ACT college readiness assessment is a standardized test used in undergraduate admissions decisions.

\(*p < .05. \,**p < .01. \,***p < .001.\)
Table 13. Independent T-Tests by School Type for Charter Schools.\textsuperscript{a}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>For-profit</th>
<th>Nonprofit</th>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Special</th>
<th>Commute</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Commuter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent inv.</td>
<td>18.70</td>
<td>31.87*</td>
<td>25.43</td>
<td>28.64</td>
<td>14.47</td>
<td>30.79**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent decision-making</td>
<td>41.70</td>
<td>46.03</td>
<td>40.08</td>
<td>55.93*</td>
<td>37.60</td>
<td>46.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(17.87)</td>
<td>(22.57)</td>
<td>(18.84)</td>
<td>(21.67)</td>
<td>(17.81)</td>
<td>(21.28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent–tchr trust</td>
<td>42.52</td>
<td>57.00**</td>
<td>48.38</td>
<td>57.86</td>
<td>38.40</td>
<td>55.62**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>85.93</td>
<td>94.50</td>
<td>91.80</td>
<td>88.14</td>
<td>79.09</td>
<td>95.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(30.40)</td>
<td>(12.48)</td>
<td>(21.36)</td>
<td>(24.84)</td>
<td>(35.14)</td>
<td>(12.36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(18.41)</td>
<td>(11.01)</td>
<td>(14.28)</td>
<td>(15.56)</td>
<td>(26.30)</td>
<td>(3.44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>7.37</td>
<td>10.51</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(25.24)</td>
<td>(2.77)</td>
<td>(16.23)</td>
<td>(18.82)</td>
<td>(25.97)</td>
<td>(11.47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. Disadv.</td>
<td>91.07**</td>
<td>83.29</td>
<td>87.89</td>
<td>82.96</td>
<td>92.23*</td>
<td>84.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.52)</td>
<td>(10.81)</td>
<td>(9.35)</td>
<td>(14.24)</td>
<td>(8.02)</td>
<td>(11.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students (#)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>528 (188)</td>
<td>510 (261)</td>
<td>521 (183)</td>
<td>507 (350)</td>
<td>497 (195)</td>
<td>530 (246)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>430 (317)</td>
<td>637 (293)</td>
<td>654 (410)</td>
<td>451 (294)</td>
<td>580 (371)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute (mi.)</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>4.81**</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>5.61**</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>5.02***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.67)</td>
<td>(2.27)</td>
<td>(1.91)</td>
<td>(2.24)</td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(1.92)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT (sec.)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>17.05</td>
<td>14.14</td>
<td>15.67*</td>
<td>16.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.70)</td>
<td>(1.00)</td>
<td>(0.53)</td>
<td>(2.30)</td>
<td>(0.94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math &amp; Read</td>
<td>16.45</td>
<td>14.69</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>11.69</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>16.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-year math</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>19.04</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>14.21</td>
<td>19.73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.75)</td>
<td>(14.31)</td>
<td>(11.37)</td>
<td>(11.35)</td>
<td>(7.42)</td>
<td>(13.63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-year reading</td>
<td>35.73</td>
<td>33.88</td>
<td>28.20</td>
<td>26.72</td>
<td>33.14</td>
<td>35.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15.21)</td>
<td>(17.07)</td>
<td>(17.08)</td>
<td>(19.20)</td>
<td>(9.17)</td>
<td>(18.33)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a}All figures refer to school level.
\textsuperscript{b}Includes two schools with primary grades.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Regression Predicting Parental Involvement

Table 14 presents the results of the regression models on general parental involvement. In Model 1, the non-profit managed charter school coefficient is positive and statistically significant, but the for-profit managed charter school coefficient is near zero. Non-profit managed charter schools score .68 of a standard deviation higher than public schools, indicating a moderate relationship. In Model 2, after demographic variables for race and economic disadvantage are introduced, the nonprofit charter school coefficient increases by 35% and the for-profit managed charter school coefficient becomes statistically significant. Non-profit-managed charter schools exhibit a large relationship, scoring .92 of a standard deviation higher than public schools. For-profit managed charter schools score .44 of a standard deviation greater than public schools, which is approaching a moderate relationship. The proportion of variance explained in Model 2 rises from approximately 8% to 22%.

In Model 3, dummy variables for secondary schools and for special focus schools are added. Both the nonprofit- and for-profit managed charter school coefficients remain largely unchanged.\(^1\) The total variability in the outcome explained in Model 3 rises to 35%. In Model 4, the introduction of average student commute distance, a control for self-selection, reduces the nonprofit- managed charter school coefficient by 32% and reduces the for-profit charter school coefficient by nearly half. The nonprofit charter coefficient remains statistically significant with non-profit managed charter schools scoring .62 of a standard deviation higher than public schools and exhibiting a moderate relationship. With the addition of average student commute distance, the for- profit-managed charter school coefficient loses statistical significance. Model 4 explains 39% of the total variability in general parental involvement.
Table 14. Regressions Predicting General Parental Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit charter</td>
<td>13.78***</td>
<td>18.57***</td>
<td>18.18***</td>
<td>12.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.99)</td>
<td>(3.74)</td>
<td>(3.41)</td>
<td>(3.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit charter</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>8.81*</td>
<td>9.34*</td>
<td>4.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.49)</td>
<td>(4.42)</td>
<td>(4.03)</td>
<td>(4.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. disadv.</td>
<td>–0.49***</td>
<td>–0.29*</td>
<td>–0.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.27***</td>
<td>0.31***</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary (dummy)</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.23***</td>
<td>12.40***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.31)</td>
<td>(3.54)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special focus</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>–0.99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.02)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.58***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>18.09***</td>
<td>53.14***</td>
<td>31.51***</td>
<td>22.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.95)</td>
<td>(9.25)</td>
<td>(9.41)</td>
<td>(9.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.378</td>
<td>.421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. $R^2$</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>.353</td>
<td>.393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Unstandardized coefficients presented. Standard errors in parentheses. Public schools are the reference group for non-profit and for-profit managed charter school coefficients. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Regression Predicting Parent Decision-making

Table 15 presents the results of the regression models on parent decision-making. In Model 1, both charter coefficients are negative and statistically significant. Non-profit managed charter schools score .50 of a standard deviation below public schools, while for-profit managed charter schools score .72 of a standard deviation below public schools. Both are moderate relationships. Model 1 explains 9% of the variability in parent decision making. Following the introduction of demographic variables in Model 2, both charter school coefficients remain similar, and the model explains nearly the same amount of variability in the outcome. In Model 3, dummy variables for secondary schools and for special focus schools are added. Although the secondary school and special focus variables are both
statistically significant, both the nonprofit- and for-profit-managed charter school coefficients are largely unchanged, remaining statistically significant in a negative direction. The positive relationship between secondary and special focus schools and parent decision-making appears to occur in both charter and public schools. The total variability in the outcome explained by Model 3 rises to 15%. In Model 4, the addition of average student commute distance increases the negative relationship for both charter school coefficients. The for-profit managed charter school coefficient decreases by 45%, and the nonprofit coefficient decreases by 25%. For-profit managed charter schools score .69 of a standard deviation below public schools and non-profit managed charter schools score .82 of a standard deviation below public schools, indicating moderate to large negative relationships. The final model explains 17% of the variability in the parent decision-making.
### Table 15. Regressions Predicting Parent Decision-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parent decision-making</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-profit charter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit charter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Econ. disadv.</td>
<td>−0.14</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sec. (dummy)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.70*</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.75)</td>
<td>(4.09)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.07**</td>
<td>7.64*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.43)</td>
<td>(3.58)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td>56.08***</td>
<td>55.89***</td>
<td>40.36***</td>
<td>33.74***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.91)</td>
<td>(9.91)</td>
<td>(10.66)</td>
<td>(10.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. $R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.075</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unstandardized coefficients presented. Standard errors in parentheses. For non-profit and for-profit managed charter school coefficients, public schools are the reference group.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether charter schools generate higher rates of parental involvement than their public school peers in high choice deindustrialized cities. This work sought to extend previous scholarship by distinguishing among different types of charter schools and controlling for self-selection bias. It was hypothesized that charter schools would outperform public schools on general parental involvement but that this charter school advantage would decline after controlling for student commute distance. The analyses found that only non-profit managed charter schools elicited statistically higher rates of general parental involvement than public schools, net of demographic composition, school characteristics, and student commute distance. In addition, this study expected no statistical differences between charter and public schools on parent decision-making. The results, however, showed that public schools outperformed both for-profit- and non-profit-managed charter schools on parent decision-making, net of demographic composition, school characteristics, and student commute distance.

General Parental Involvement

Charter schools showed higher general parental involvement as in other studies (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Smith et al., 2011), but in disaggregating charter schools by management type, only non-profit managed charter schools outperformed public schools, net of controls. Prior research indicates that nonprofit-managed charter schools tend to adopt a stronger community-oriented approach than their for-profit managed counterparts (Ertas & Roch, 2014; Henig et al., 2005). In challenging urban contexts, this community-centered outlook may help nonprofit charter schools reduce barriers to parental involvement by addressing local needs. In contrast to non-profit managed charter schools embedded in local
communities, for-profit managed charter schools appear to operate larger networks of schools with home offices often outside of the communities where their schools are located (Brown et al., 2004; Miron & Gulosino, 2013; Miron et al., 2012). The headquarters of major for-profit managed charter schools in Detroit are not located in the city (Jahnke & Hanson, 2014). The literature indicates that for-profit managed charter schools seem to apply uniform models for multiple schools across different school settings (Brown et al., 2004). Consequently, for-profit managed charter schools’ parental involvement strategies may be standardized for large numbers of schools and less attentive to specific needs in complex inner-city settings.

**Parent Decision-making**

The models measuring parent decision-making unexpectedly demonstrated nearly opposite patterns than those found for the general measure of parental involvement. Public schools outperformed both for-profit- and nonprofit-managed charter schools, net of school, demographic, and self-selection factors. Although previous scholarship indicates that for-profit managed charter schools are less likely than non-profit managed charter schools to involve parents in school leadership roles (Brown et al., 2004), public schools in this study outperformed both for-profit and nonprofit charter schools. There may be several reasons for the observed results. First, charter schools may be more likely to operate under a particular school model or target a specific student population (Eckes, Fox, & Buchanan, 2011). By choosing to enroll their children in a school of choice, families may be tacitly accepting a school’s overarching strategy and expressing a preference for its approach (Eckes et al., 2011). Schools may, in turn, view parents as having a supporting role in carrying out an accepted strategy for school operations. Some charter schools even require parents to sign
contracts agreeing to terms set by the school (Becker et al., 1997). Second, most public schools have long-standing structures in place, such as parent–teacher associations, that may facilitate parent leadership roles and school governance (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Third, unlike relatively new charter schools, many schools in deindustrialized inner-city neighborhoods are multigenerational with grandparents, parents, and children having attended the same school (Sugrue, 2014; Wilson, 2012). It is plausible that some families with enduring relationships and experience with a school in their community are able to participate in school leadership activities. Findings in this study lend support to this idea. Neighborhood schools, for instance, showed lower outcomes than those of commuter schools in several areas, including for academic achievement and general parental involvement. For parent decision-making, however, there was no statistical difference between neighborhood and commuter schools, and the inclusion of the commute distance variable increased the relationship between charter schools and parent decision-making as opposed to reducing it. Finally, charter school founders and members of their governing boards are often parents who participate in direct leadership roles by serving on a school board of directors (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Smith et al., 2011). Parents serving in such roles may not be recognized as parent participants in school decision-making because of their formal positions. This situation may contribute to lower reported rates of parent decision-making in charter schools.

With charter schools reporting higher levels of general parental involvement (e.g., communication, volunteering, and home learning) and public schools reporting higher parent decision-making, schools appear to have divergent parental involvement strategies that may have different implications. Enhancing opportunities for parent decision-making in
challenging inner-city schools may contribute to empowering low-income and minority parents who have a desire to participate but face barriers to doing so (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Conversely, performance mandates placed on charter schools may prompt them to focus on parental involvement activities that have the largest influence on student achievement. School-initiated parental involvement programs related to home–school communication and learning at home have shown positive effects on academic achievement (Jeynes, 2012) and may be considered more effective areas of emphasis if a school envisions parental involvement as a lever for raising student achievement. Detroit’s families also seem to prioritize these areas of parental involvement as opposed to participating in school decision-making (Excellent Schools Detroit, 2010). This preference may mean that some families are willing to opt for a charter school even if the school offers fewer opportunities for decision-making than a neighborhood public school.

**Selection Effects**

High racial and socioeconomic homogeneity in many deindustrialized inner cities necessitates examination of within-group variation for parent characteristics that might bias school effects (Orfield & Lee, 2005). In accounting for potential self-selection bias, commute distance appeared to be an important control for mitigating the effects of motivated parents gravitating to schools of choice, whether public or charter. The relationship between non-profit managed charter schools and parental involvement decreased from large to moderate after controlling for commute distance, while this relationship lost statistical significance for for-profit managed charter schools. In addition, commute distance reduced the relationship between special focus schools and general parental involvement and parent decision-making. Families who commit time and other resources to seeking out a school with
a special focus may be engaged at higher rates than those who do not (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). Concurrently, in matching parent preferences through a special model or approach to parents, special focus schools may further induce parental involvement. There seems to be an interplay between attracting committed parents and school approaches that match parent preferences (Garcia, 2008).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations to this study are worth noting. First, the two parental involvement measures reported by teachers may be subject to social desirability bias to some extent. Nevertheless, teachers may have the most consistent interactions with a broad spectrum of parents in a school, making them an important source of information when evaluating parental involvement activities occurring in a school community (Christianakis, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002). In high choice environments, pressure to present a school to the public positively may be more acutely experienced by principals and other school administrators than teachers (Jabbar, 2015). Teachers as a group may offer a more complete and accurate account of parental involvement in a school than an evaluation of parental involvement provided by a principal. Future work that includes parents’ perspectives may help to triangulate teacher reports of parental involvement.

Another limitation is that even though commute distance appears to have been a useful control for self-selection bias, other unobserved aspects of self-selection may have influenced reported rates of parent participation. Among demographically similar parents, those with well-developed social or family networks, in particular, may have access to information and resources that other parents do not (Fleming, Cowen, Witte, & Wolf, 2015; Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012). Controls for social and family networks were not used in this
study but with school choice applying to both public and charter schools in Detroit, unaccounted for self-selection effects on parental involvement also apply to some public schools, possibly lessening bias in comparisons of charter and public schools on parental involvement. Third, the survey items covered relatively common components of parental involvement, and consequently, may have overlooked innovative approaches used in Detroit’s charter and public schools. Although the literature finds that charter school strategies generally map onto the broad components of Epstein’s parental involvement typology (Smith et al., 2011), research reports that urban schools of choice may use innovative approaches for engaging parents, such as home visits, incentives for parents, parent participation contracts, and employment of parents in school. The same survey items were also used for both primary and secondary schools, but much research suggests that the areas of emphasis for parental involvement tend to differ at primary and secondary levels (Bhargava & Witherspoon, 2015; Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Wang et al., 2014).

Despite these caveats, the overall findings in this study provide an important analysis of the influence charter schools on parental involvement in challenging inner-city contexts with extensive school choice. Detroit is a representative case with implications for other deindustrialized cities where the charter school movement has progressed. In uncovering layers of complexity in parental involvement in such settings, this work points to several new lines of inquiry. Future research is needed to probe differences in the focus of parental involvement strategies between charter and public schools. Closer inspection of the underlying mechanisms that might account for different levels of parental involvement in nonprofit- and for-profit managed charter schools would offer important clarification on relative approaches and the rationale behind them. As both school and self-selection
characteristics appear to influence rates of parental involvement, qualitative work might seek to deepen analysis of the interplay between parent-related self-selection and school strategies for engaging parents in schools of choice. In high choice settings serving predominately low-income African American families, self-selection appears to be a complex process with considerable variation in how demographically similar families participate in their children’s education (Fleming et al., 2015). Yet, much remains unknown about the forces driving this variation. Chapter 4 examines these dynamics using qualitative methods.
Chapter 4

A qualitative study of the mechanisms underlying perceived school safety
The types of kids that we get are different. This is inner-city Detroit. [The parents] choose to drive their kids to school every day.
Teacher, Charter school

Introduction

Charter schools have rapidly expanded in deindustrialized cities beleaguered by high rates of crime, concentrated poverty, physical disorder, and family dissolution (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Scott, 2016; Sugrue, 2014; US Department of Education, 2015; Wilson, 2012). In these challenging settings, violence on school grounds has been a central concern for school communities (Lake et al., 2015; Skogan, 2015; Stewart & Wolf, 2012). Student reports of victimization and exposure to criminal activity in inner-city schools have remained alarmingly high for years (Devine, 1996; Eaton et al., 2012; Kann et al., 2013; Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Neiman & Hill, 2011).

Public schools have received much criticism as a result, being perceived as having unsafe learning environments. In response, proponents of school choice have promoted charter schools as a way to provide safer school options for low-income minority families “stuck” in public schools (Archbald, 2004; Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Maranto & Ritter, 2014). Low-income African American families in deindustrialized cities have since opted for charter schools in large numbers (Goldring & Philipps, 2008), reporting school safety as the primary reason for seeking out a charter school (Friedman, Bobrowski, & Geraci, 2006; Katz, 2015; Lake et al., 2015; Stewart & Wolf, 2012; Wilson, Marshall, Wilson, & Krizek, 2010).

Charter schools operate independent of a central school district and receive funding on a per-pupil basis. These dynamics are expected to foster innovation and
responsiveness to local priorities, theoretically allowing charter schools to develop effective safety strategies in challenging conditions (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Renzulli, Barr, & Paino, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). Despite the importance of perceived school safety to understanding charter school reforms in deindustrialized cities, research has disproportionately focused on student achievement when evaluating charter schools in cities with high crime rates (Angrist et al., 2013; Betts & Tang, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). The minimal research considering school safety provides limited analysis, indicating that charter schools are safer than public schools because of strict behavioral policies, highly structured learning environments, and secure school locations (Burdick-Will, Keels, & Schuble, 2013; Christensen, 2007; Golann, 2015; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Schneider et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2011; Whitman, 2008).

An important limitation to claims about safety strategies used in charter schools is that they do not account for within-group self-selection processes (Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). In depressed cities with high proportions of low-income African American families, the common logic of differentiating school choosers by race, class, and family structure may not adequately distinguish school choosers from non-choosers (Archbald, 2004; Cowen, 2010; Denice & Gross, 2016; Fleming et al., 2015). Families who seek out a school of choice may be more committed, have broader social networks, and greater access to resources than families who do not engage in school choice (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Reardon & Galindo, 2009). The unobserved home advantages of school choosers may be responsible for higher perceptions of school safety in schools of choice as opposed to innovative institutional approaches (Betts & Tang,
2014; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). Yet, the respective school and family factors underlying perceived safety in charter schools in deindustrialized cities are not well understood.

This study explores the factors underlying perceived school safety in Detroit, Michigan by examining not only school characteristics but also differentiating characteristics of school choosers. Interviews with parents (n = 20) and teachers (n = 20) in both charter and public schools are undertaken together with school site observations (n = 40) and numerous informal interviews with students, security guards, police, community leaders, and government officials. These methods are used to triangulate findings and differentiate between charter and public schools. This work has potential to extend the literature by elucidating unobserved within-group differences between school choosers and non-choosers among demographically similar families. These differences may provide important context for understanding school safety strategies. Furthermore, investigation of school strategies may offer insight for improving school safety in deindustrialized cities where violence in school has remained a pressing concern.

**Study Setting**

Detroit, Michigan is representative of deindustrialized cities, such as Flint, Cleveland, Gary, and New Orleans, where charter schools have proliferated. Like other deindustrialized cities, Detroit faces considerable social and economic problems that place substantial demands on the city’s public and charter schools (Bettis, 1994; Kann et

---

7 In interviews, school parental involvement strategies were explored both in the context of perceived safety and to enable examination of the statistical results reported in Chapter 3.
al., 2013; Sugrue, 2014). In Detroit, 83% of the city’s youth are African American and 57% live below the poverty line (Stewart & Wolf, 2012; US Census, 2011). Nearly 86% of Detroit residents report having less than a bachelor’s degree and more than 60% of the city’s families are single-female households (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Detroit has routinely recorded one of the highest violent crime rates in the United States (Hammer, 2011; Raleigh & Galster, 2015). Crime has permeated the city’s schools with Detroit’s students reporting high exposure to violent crime in school (Eaton et al., 2012; Kaet, 2013). A quarter of Detroit’s high school students report being exposed to violence on a daily basis while nearly 40% report having a relative or friend shot within a twelve-month period (Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, 2013). To combat youth violence, Detroit has received federal funding for volunteer patrols along student commutes, enhanced security protocols in schools, and increased violence preventions programs (Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, 2013). Police, security, and video surveillance have greatly increased in the city’s public schools in recent years (DPS, 2013). Less is known about charter schools beyond broad statements on their websites about parental involvement and maintaining a disciplined and orderly learning environment (Lubienski & Lee, 2016).

In the city’s open enrollment system, approximately 70% of Detroit’s families participate in school choice in some form and nearly half of all students residing in Detroit attend a charter school (NAPCS, 2014 Stewart & Wolf, 2012). There are charter and public schools that tend to serve students who primarily reside in the neighborhood surrounding a school. These neighborhood schools comprise the city’s lowest performing schools, including state-controlled “turnaround” public and charter schools (Bedrick &
Eden, 2017). The city’s neighborhood public schools also record the highest rates of crime and violence on school grounds (see Tables 6 & 8 in Chapter 2 for a breakdown of these data). There are also public and charter schools that draw students from all over the city and constitute the city’s high performing selective enrollment and magnet public schools as well as many of the city’s highest performing charter schools (Bedrick & Eden, 2017). Both for-profit and non-profit management organizations operate charter schools while Detroit Public Schools, the city’s school district, has diversified the managerial structures of some of its schools by authorizing self-governing and district charter schools.

**Literature**

**Perceived School Safety**

School safety is fundamental to a well-functioning learning environment. Perceptions of safety in school are related to student achievement, attendance, mental health, and school climate (Johnson, 2009; Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Schreck & Miller, 2003; Skiba et al., 2006; Ripski & Gregory, 2009). A broad range of different home, school, and neighborhood contexts appear to affect perceived school safety. Within a city, school location may have a large effect on perceived school safety as specific neighborhood dynamics are thought to shape the context for schooling (Kirk & Sampson, 2010; Sampson, 2012; Lacoe, 2015). Schools set in neighborhoods with high rates of crime, poverty, physical disorder, and segregation may face relatively greater obstacles to ensuring safety of the learning environment. Gang activity and criminal behavior can spillover from neighborhoods into schools, leading to violence on school grounds and a
climate of fear (Kirk & Sampson, 2010). Neighborhood disorder, such as structural blight and vacancy, may also be related to lower perceived school safety (Skogan, 2015). Neighborhoods high in blight and other forms of disorder may create a perception of low social control in a school community that serves to exacerbate criminal behavior and induce fear of crime among students (Sampson, 2012; Skogan, 2015). Neighborhoods confronting challenges of poverty and crime may have less collective efficacy, limiting capacity to deal with youth crime and violence (Sampson, 2012). In such neighborhoods, schools may also have fewer community resources to draw on for preventing crime, violence, and disruptive behaviors in school.

Perceived school safety may be affected by conditions in schools. Buckling floors, unrepaired heating and cooling systems, and other evidence of structural decay of a school building can transmit a lack of social control, making students feel unsafe (Kirk and Sampson, 2010). Single violent incidents, such as a shooting or homicide on school grounds, can have lasting effects on student perceptions while ongoing bullying in and around schools have been found to lower perceived school safety. (Skiba et al., 2006). Ties in the school community appear to be important component as poor relationships between peers, students and teachers, and home and school can limit a school’s ability to deal with incidents of violence and victimization (Kirk & Sampson, 2012). Although formal security measures may lower actual rates of violence in school, these measures may actually induce fear by signaling potential for danger.
Charter School Safety Strategies

The rationale for charter schools suggests that individual choice will ultimately increase school safety. By empowering families through choice, charter schools are expected to attract students by being responsive to local priorities and using managerial autonomy to develop innovative safety strategies (Archbald, 2004; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013; Miron, 2010). Students attending neighborhood public schools deemed unsafe are envisioned leaving for safer learning environments in charter schools. These student outflows are anticipated to drive competitive forces, pressuring neighborhood public schools to improve safety or lose per-pupil funding to schools with higher perceived safety (Ritter, 2016; Shober, Manna, & Witte, 2006). In testing these theoretical claims, a limited number of studies reports that charter schools have higher rates of perceived school safety than their public school peers (Christensen (2007; Teske et al., 2000). This difference in safety perceptions has been attributed to different factors.

In cities with high crimes rates, charter schools may have a locational advantage, choosing to establish schools in relatively safer sections of a city with higher social control (Burdick-Will, Keels, Schuble, 2013; Gulsino & Lubienski, 2011; Schreck, 2010). Charter school may maintain orderly school corridors and disciplined classroom environments, stressing strict behavioral codes and enforcement of rules (Angrist et al. 2013; Golann, 2015; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Whitman, 2008). Charter schools may further seek to build dense school communities by eliciting parental involvement through home visits, incentives for parent attendance, and parent contracts requiring service at school (Smith et al., 2011). The culmination of these purported strategies may raise expectations and communicate high standards that
contribute to perceptions of the security and safety in the school community (Kirk & Sampson, 2012). At the same time, some of these policies may produce certain inequities. Educational attainment and life outcomes of students are substantially lowered following an expulsion from school (Kirk & Sampson, 2010). As such, strict behavioral policies may lead to high rates of expulsion and attrition among students prone to behavioral problems (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013).

**Safety as a Driver of School Choice**

Many reasons factor into parental decisions to engage in school choice (Fleming et al., 2015). Educational underperformance, a bad experience with school staff, or disagreement over a special education evaluation may compel families to seek out a charter school (Golding & Philipps, 2008; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). Charter schools may entice families by advertising special programming, extra learning supports (e.g. extended school day, tutoring), and discipline (Drake, 2000; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Ritter, 2016). In economically depressed cities, while such factors are likely to play into school decisions, perceived school safety appears to be one of the most significant reasons that families participate in school choice (Fleming et al., 2015; Goldhaber, 1999; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2012; Wilson, Marshall, Wilson, & Krizek, 2010). The connection between safety and choice is mirrored by a vast literature on public housing vouchers and residential selection in cities (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008; Katz, 2015; Sampson, 2012). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) well-known *Moving to Opportunity* study found that low-income minority parents cited safety as the primary reason for accepting a
housing voucher to move from their current residence to a less impoverished neighborhood (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008; Katz, 2015). However, results from the study showed that a large percentage of families did not accept housing vouchers, describing a complex range of barriers to moving to more secure neighborhoods faced by low-income minority families awarded government-funded housing vouchers (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008). The prioritization of school safety in school choice processes may have triggered similar mechanisms with some families able to participate in school choice and others facing barriers to doing so.

**Characteristics of School Choosers in Deindustrialized Cities**

School choice in cities has sharply increased through charter schooling. Prior to the charter school movement, fee-paying private schools in industrial cities comprised one of the main alternatives to public schools. Catholic schools long represented the most prominent option outside of the public school sector. Within the public system, city school districts have offered options through magnet, selective enrollment, and vocational schools of choice for decades (Archbald, 2004). However, the onset of charter school reforms beginning in the early nineties led to a reshaping public education, expanding tuition-free school options in cities with large numbers of low-income minority families (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Goldring & Philipps, 2008; US Department of Education, 2015). A general criticism of school choice policies has been that schools of choice are inaccessible to low-income and minority families (Cucchiara, 2013). To some extent, however, charter schools seem to have bridged the socio-demographic gap in choice participation (Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012; Ritter et al., 2016). Charter school
enrollments have risen dramatically to approximately three million students in 43 states (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). A larger proportion of this growth has taken place in deindustrialized cities where the percentage students enrolled in charter schools ranges from 30% and higher in Flint, Cleveland, Gary, New Orleans, and Detroit (National Alliance for Public Charter School, 2014).

Although low-income minority families tend to be depicted as lacking access to financial and social resources needed to access schools of choice (Denice & Gross, 2016; Levin, 1998; Cowen, 2010), large numbers participate in school choice in depressed cities. Social networks and access to information constitute two factors thought to enable participation in school choice (Cowen, 2010; Goldring & Philipps, 2008). School proximity to residence also seems to support school choice since many families in economically depressed cities do not have access to public or personal transportation (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Stewart & Wolf, 2012). School choosers may possess other subtle advantages, potentially having higher levels of educational commitment and motivation relative to non-choosers (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014). Among demographically similar families, the precise factors driving within-group variation in school choice participation remain uncertain. Determining how school choosers systematically differ among demographically similar families may be important to evaluating safety strategies as self-selection raises questions as to whether specific charter school strategies are responsible for perceived safety or the result of attracting families with certain preexisting advantages (Betts & Tang, 2014; Burdick-Will, 2013). Statistical evidence hints at a combination of both school
characteristics and preexisting attributes of school choosers influencing performance in charter schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Goldring & Phillips, 2008).

Random assignment to schools would be an ideal way to deal with selection bias, but costs and ethical issues tend to make this method impractical. Quasi-experimental studies using charter school lottery data represent an alternative method. Among self-selection in a charter school lottery, those who gain admission to a charter school can be compared to those who do not gain admission (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2007; Tuttle, Gleason, & Clark, 2012). Even though these methods may have strong internal validity, they may have limited generalizability since not all charter schools are oversubscribed (Angrist et al., 2013; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; Tuttle, Gleason, & Clark, 2012; Zimmer & Guarino, 2011). Qualitative methods may help to elucidate distinguishing features of school choosers that may confer a self-selection advantage to charter schools over their public school counterparts.

**Methods**

In-depth interviews with parents \((n = 20)\) and teachers \((n = 20)\) were undertaken along with numerous informal interviews with students, security guards, police, and community leaders. For the formal interviews, both purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants (Patton, 2002). Initial study participants were recruited at school sites, non-profit community organizations, school parent councils, and social networking websites. For parents, face-to-face interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Questions inquired about parent school decision-making processes, mechanisms for accessing information, factors enabling school selection, perceptions of
school and neighborhood safety, school approaches to parents, and school safety strategies. Parents may provide important understanding of school choice processes (Cowen, 2010; Stewart & Wolf, 2012) and can serve as a source of information on school strategies (Goldhaber, 1999; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Smith et al., 2011).

For teachers, interviews were conducted by telephone and were 45 minutes to two hours in duration. Within schools, teachers are likely to have knowledge of school strategies and through their interactions with the broader school community, may be able to shed light on both school characteristics and parental self-selection processes. These two sets of interviewees allow for triangulation of findings (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Small, 2011). Teachers were asked about school administrative structures, school safety strategies, school-initiated parental involvement strategies, school climate and location, student attrition, school expulsion policies, and characteristics of students and parents. Interviews were linked to charter and public schools with charter schools being categorized by non-profit and for-profit educational management organizations (see Table 1 below for breakdown).

Table 6. Formal Interviews by School Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit managed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-profit managed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School site observations ($n = 40$) were conducted during morning and afternoon school commutes over three periods in December, 2015, May, 2016, and June, 2016 to provide an additional means of contextualizing and confirming data sources. Multiple
school site observations were done in each of Detroit’s seven electoral districts for city council. Figure 1 shows the location of each city council district. The location of Downtown Detroit is demarcated by the word “Detroit.” During site observations, field notes were taken on neighborhood and school conditions, school pickup and drop off strategies, indicators of school security, and accessibility to the school from outside. Informal discussions with police, security guards, teachers, and students were done to deepen site observations. Field notes were taken following each discussion.

**Figure 1.** Map of Detroit’s City Council Electoral Districts

There are several limitations to these qualitative approaches worth noting. The teachers and parents who participated in interviews represent a subset of Detroit’s charter and public schools. Not all schools were represented. Participant interviews drawn from those willing to participate in an interview may be subject to selection bias in their own right (Collier & Mahoney, 1996; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). An important caveat for parent interviews as a source of information is that multiple influences are likely to
factor into parents’ school decisions, possibly making it difficult for parents to articulate the rationale behind school selections (Hoxby & Murarka, 2008). Field observations may be limited by a researcher’s perceptual biases in the interpretation of events while limited access to school sites may constrain information gleaned from field observations (Hammersley, 2016). Any one of these data sources on its own represents a substantial limitation. However, the combination of parent interviews from outside of the school, teacher interviews from within school, informal interviews involving multiple stakeholders, and site observations provides different channels for triangulating findings, mitigating some of the biases that may be particular to any one single data collection method.

**Data Analysis**

For the data analysis, information from field notes and interview transcripts was initially organized into categories based on the topics discussed in the interview questions. This information was then divided into two separate categories for charter and public schools and further subdivided within the charter school category by non-profit managed and for-profit managed charter schools and also within the public school category by commuter (e.g. selective enrollment) and neighborhood public schools. Interview data in each category was analyzed using thematic analysis and themes were developed over three iterations (Braun & Clarke 2006). Broad categories were first developed (e.g. school location, school orderliness, parental involvement). Sub-themes were coded under these broad categories and representative quotations were listed under

---

8 The design of qualitative interviews were guided by statistical results in Chapters 2 and 3.
each of the sub-themes. Each theme was coded as being primarily related to a “school characteristic” or a “parent attribute.”

Following these steps, themes and representative quotations were re-examined and checked for accuracy by triangulating information across the following data sources: field notes, teacher interviews, parent interviews, and site observations (Braun & Clarke 2006). In attempting to triangulate information, contradictory evidence was explicitly sought (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although patterns aligned well across different data sources, inconsistent information was found among interviewees on the theme of student composition and school cropping strategies. This inconsistency prompted additional rounds of transcript analysis, in which divergent cropping strategies were found for for-profit and non-profit managed charter schools.

**School Characteristics**

**School Location**

Varying levels of neighborhood crime and poverty may explain differences in safety perceptions between schools within cities (Sampson, 2012). Charter schools may be able to raise perceived school safety by locating in relatively safer, more affluent neighborhoods within a city (Burdick-Will, Keels, Schuble, 2013; Gulsino & Lubienski, 2011; Schreck, 2010). In Detroit, however, pervasive blight and crime are more uniform across the city than other large cities, such as Chicago (Detroit Residential Parcel Survey, 2010; Raleigh & Galster, 2015; Sampson, 2012). Site observations showed that even in the greater downtown area of Detroit, which has undergone recent regeneration in some sections, considerable blight and crime persist. In regenerated sections, new housing
developments abut large abandoned buildings and hollowed out mansions sit vacant alongside newly restored ones. Near the downtown core, one of the city’s most elite and well-resourced selective enrollment public schools is in a state-of-the-art building with superior facilities, but the school is not far from vacant buildings, blight, and damaged infrastructure. In the vicinity of the elite school are overgrown fields strewn with makeshift tents, mattresses, and grocery carts and large congregations of homeless openly using drugs.

Outside of greater downtown in residential neighborhoods, the number of public and charter schools is sparser. Physical decay of residences, commercial property, and infrastructure is commonplace in the overwhelming majority of neighborhoods throughout the city. That is, vacant lots, burned down homes, drug houses, and ad hoc dumping grounds are near both charter and public schools (Raleigh & Galster, 2015). Even schools in the relatively small number of well-maintained neighborhoods are never a few blocks from blight and crime. In considering the potential neighborhood influence on student perceptions of safety, it is important to note that students that use family transportation to commute to schools will likely have less exposure to the surrounding neighborhood. During site observations, the situation was particularly evident in the case of high performing charter schools and selective enrollment public schools where lines of cars packed schools during pick-up and drop-off. As a whole, a lack of substantial neighborhood-level variation in crime and physical disorder suggest that neither charter nor public schools derive an apparent locational advantage on perceived school safety.
School Orderliness

Although neighborhood location did not appear to distinguish charter and public schools, parents and teachers consistently reported that school safety was at the forefront of their school choice decisions, and whether a charter or public school parent or teacher, charter schools were perceived as being safer than public schools. School orderliness, such as adherence to strict behavioral policies, well-maintained hallways and classrooms, and cleanliness of school facilities, seemed to be partly attributable to these perceptions. Charter schools were generally described as adhering to stricter behavioral codes, which has been found in previous reports on charter schools (Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Whitman, 2008; Zimmer & Gaurino, 2011). Many charter schools communicated high expectations for student conduct to the entire school community, linking a disciplined and structured school environment to student learning. Charter school teachers articulated these strict behavioral codes and high expectation for following the rules:

You know what? We ran a tight ship. You got infractions if your shirt was untied. Our K-5 kids walked in silent lines in the hallway. It was very rigorous. It was almost like boot camp. But you know what? The kids were respectful. They knew what was expected of them. You had to behave and that was it. There was no truancy and if there was, they’d be gone. 
Teacher, Charter elementary school

Structural conditions of the school building were also tied to perceived safety. Parents routinely noted that the physical conditions of charter schools were generally better maintained than those of the city’s neighborhood public schools. The relatively well-kept structures of charter schools helped communicate orderliness of the school while appearing to transmit cues about safety to the school community. School orderliness seemed to be one of the main ways that charter schools attracted safety-seeking families. Parents mentioned that when they inspected a prospective school, they
looked at the cleanliness of bathrooms, classrooms, and hallways, interpreting these
spaces as indicators of school safety. By contrast, neighborhood public schools tended to
have a very bad reputation for building conditions. Poor physical conditions in many of
the city’s neighborhood public schools were tied to school disorder and lower perceived
school safety. Neighborhood public school parents and teachers interviewed in this study
relayed countless examples of decaying conditions inside neighborhood public schools,
citing broken plumbing, cracked walls, and buckling floors. Local media occasionally ran
stories on this state of deterioration upon receiving photos taken by students and teachers,
seeking to draw the public’s attention to these problems. Structural decay among
neighborhood public schools seemed to match the level of blight observed throughout the
city while also communicating to students that they were in one the city’s substandard
schools. In some instances, poor conditions in neighborhood public schools were
responsible for causing actual harm with students being exposed to black mold or being
struck by falling debris. One charter school parent described such an incident at her
neighborhood public school that had prompted to her to seek out a charter school:

*That [neighborhood public school] shouldn’t even be open. I remember a girl fell
through the floor. Just fell through the floor. It’s crazy that they have to send their
kids to schools that are worse than where they’re living.*

Parent, Charter elementary school

Images of public schools in local and national media were not only of school
disrepair but also of teacher sickouts⁹ and labor disagreements, corruption cases and FBI
probes, and violence on school grounds. In 2011, a two-hour nationally televised report
titled “A National Disgrace” depicted Detroit’s public schools, documenting severe
violence, drug use, gang activity, sexual assault, and physical disorder in the city’s

---

⁹ A teacher sickout is a protest whereby teachers call in sick en masse.
district-run public schools. Unsurprisingly, neighborhood public schools had a poor reputation for school safety. Both parents and teachers cited fights, crime, gang activity, and overall disorganization as factors lowering school safety in Detroit’s neighborhood public schools. This perception of general disorder was depicted one neighborhood public high school parent:

[Neighborhood public high school]’s like the schools you see on TV. It’s so chaotic – so many fights. That’s what that school is like. You know, the movie “Lean on Me”. That’s how that school is.
Parent, Neighborhood public high school

Local media has also begun to scrutinize the city’s charter schools for financial improprieties and a lack of regulatory oversight. Despite an uptick in negative press coverage, many charter schools appeared to make positive use of the media in ways that seemed to raise public perceptions of safety in charter schools. Charter school teachers explained that educational management organizations operating charter schools were keen to bring local media to campuses to trumpet student accolades, college scholarship awardees, and other examples of school success. Local media covered a charter school’s performance at the White House as well as charter school ceremonies and guest speakers hosting well-known musicians, actors, and sports figures. In founding the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, Detroit native and former NBA star Jalen Rose has used his star power and connections to foster positive perceptions of his school through both local and national media outlets.

**Shaping the Student Body**

Charter schools seem to have more flexibility in shaping their student bodies. Although several highly regarded selective enrollment public schools in the city are able to decide the types of students that they enroll through applications and entrance
examinations, charter schools appear to use subtle strategies to manage their student bodies. Like other public schools, charter schools are required to follow legal protocols for expelling students (Michigan Department of Education, 2016). Still, charter schools were reported to have a less restrictive process for expelling students. Beyond procedural requirements for expelling a student, charter schools could counsel out students deemed as being prone to behavioral problems that might constrain classroom learning. The parent of a disruptive student might be told that the school was not a good fit for the child. In being perceived as having stricter discipline and behavioral demands, charter schools were indirectly able to deter disruptive students from seeking enrollment. Teachers explained that students with continued behavioral problems were unlikely to seek enrollment at a charter school, avoiding the stricter rules and discipline that they could encounter at charter schools.

*Kids get weeded out. We follow an expulsion protocol. It’s not a one-time, you are out. There are measures put in place. There is remediation. It’s governed by state law. But after that protocol has been completed and a kid keeps getting suspended, they are not readmitted to the school. And we are a good charter school so the knuckleheads that don’t want to be held to a high standard, don’t come here.*

Teacher, Charter high school

It is worth highlighting that some charter schools with particular community-centered mandates actively sought out more disadvantaged students. Charter schools for juvenile delinquents, pregnant teens, and students with special needs serve some of the city’s most vulnerable youth. In this way, not all charter schools were alike in their approaches to managing the student body. Some non-profit managed charter schools were even known to take in struggling students or those expelled from public schools. Nonetheless, charter schools seemed to be more likely to manage their student bodies
through cropping practices in direct and indirect ways. Charter and public school teachers expressed this sentiment, articulating how student bodies differed between charter and public schools. One veteran teacher in the public school system explained how neighborhood schools enrolled the city’s most vulnerable youth:

At [neighborhood public high school], we ended up with some of the worst behaved students on the planet. One problem with students in DPS ... in DPS, when you have 75% of kids with some sort of learning disability, it’s going to be hard to do teaching and learning. A lot of them were born addicted to drugs. What do they do in school? They start acting out.
Teacher, Neighborhood public high school

**Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement seemed related to perceived safety in school. Even though both public and charter schools stressed the importance of parental involvement, charter schools appeared to be more effective in their approaches to parents. Non-profit managed charter schools seemed especially keen to develop relationships, carrying out parent-teacher and parent-parent relationship building initiatives. As part of these efforts, they held social events for parents and family dinners with the entire school community. Non-profit managed charter schools also employed different strategies to build familiarity between parents and school. The Expeditionary Learning model was used one charter high school, whereby a teacher would be assigned to a group of students and serve as a main contact for parents from the time a student enrolled to graduation. Such strategies seemed to enable fluid home-school communication and provide a channel for resolving behavioral issues when they arose. A charter school teacher with experience in the public school system distinguished her charter school’s approach to parents from that of other public schools she worked at:
I think a good way to really think of charter schools is that it’s very family-oriented. Our deans and our principles and all the teachers, we know all our kids’ phone numbers. We know who were teaching. It’s very different than the public schools where you have no time to build a relationship. In the charter, they want that family experience. We were very flexible with the parents and the kids. We tried to cater to everyone.
Teacher, Charter elementary school

Corresponding to their parental involvement initiatives, charter schools placed emphasis on having a parent presence inside the school building. They elicited volunteering and even required parent participation in school activities\textsuperscript{10}. Public school teachers noted that requiring parent participation was something that they could not do as a public school. At parent-teacher conferences, several public school teachers reported that it was common for not a single parent to attend. Charter schools had open-door classroom policies where parents would walk in and join class at any time – a phenomenon that has been observed in the private school sector (Davies & Quirke, 2007). Charter school teachers and parents linked these forms of parent participation in school to improvements in student behavior.

We require a lot more parent support to the point where if the kid is misbehaving, we’ll make a parent come in and sit with them in class. And if the parent won’t, we won’t allow them in our school until they do.
Teacher, Charter high school

Charter schools were also more likely to extend employment to parents in school through food service, security, and administrative positions. Having parents take on such roles appeared to have a knock-on effect for perceptions of school safety. A parent

\textsuperscript{10}Interviews indicated that charter schools’ parental involvement activities do not extend to parent decision-making in school. As a group, charter schools seem to expect parents to follow a school-dictated strategy for participation and do not appear to encourage parental involvement in school decision-making. By contrast, interviews demonstrated that public schools have long-standing structures in place for enabling parent input on school governance (e.g. parent councils and parent-teacher associations). This finding sheds lights on the statistical results presented in Chapter 3.
monitoring hallways seemed to foster a sense of comfort and familiarity that differed from formal security patrols. The parent presence in charter schools stood in contrast to those in neighborhood public schools where increases in police and surveillance had occurred. As part of recently initiated measures aimed at combatting crime and victimization in its schools, Detroit’s public schools drastically increased the number of police and security officers working in schools while expanding the use of video surveillance and metal detectors (DPS, 2013). Even though these initiatives may have reduced actual victimization and crime on school campuses in public schools, both parents and teachers associated these formal security measures (e.g. police patrols and security guards) in the city’s public schools with a lack of safety at school. Previous studies have indicated similar results (Cyr, 2014; Hagan & Foster, 2012; Jones et al., 2009; Mowen, 2013; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004). One parent at a neighborhood public school expressed dissatisfaction with formal security measures, perceiving that the formal measures did not raise safety standards:

[Neighborhood public elementary school] is not organized. Their safety is not good. They have security. It’s about getting the right security. Children have come in there with knives. There’s inappropriate behavior with the adults. The police are always there. I can’t stand it; it’s too much. It’s not a good environment.

Parent, Neighborhood public elementary school

Overall, charter school strategies for improving perceived school safety were strict behavioral policies, well-maintained school facilities, media outreach, flexible management of student bodies, relationship building, and parental involvement in school. These factors may, to some extent, signal a school-driven performance advantage for charter schools. On the other hand, strict behavior codes and higher rates of expulsion may mean that charter schools derive their advantage, in part, by “cropping” disruptive
students through inequitable channels. Charter school attributes underlying perceived safety seemed to be more closely linked to the atmosphere of the learning environment as opposed to innovative classroom management strategies or special pedagogical approaches.

**Attributes of School Choosers**

Although many families in Detroit’s charter and public schools may be undifferentiated by race and social class, school choosers generally showed important distinguishing attributes relative to non-choosers. Such choice dynamics appeared to have confer an advantage to charter school in fostering perceived school safety by disproportionately sorting students from relatively more advantaged home environments into schools of choice.

**Access to Information**

In high choice cities, access to information can be vital to effective participation in school choice (Cowen, 2010; Goldring & Philipps, 2008). School choosers seemed to have greater awareness of available informational resources on schools for navigating Detroit’s complex school choice environment. Schools have different schedules, curricula, after-school offerings, and admissions processes and trying to make sense of different options was confusing and overwhelming for many parents, particularly for those who remained in their assigned neighborhood public schools. Being perplexed by Detroit’s choice system, parents were often uncertain where to access official sources of information on schools. A well-resourced coalition of business leaders, philanthropists, and community activists that purports to be an arbiter of objective information for

---

11 A common enrollment system for charter schools is to be implemented for the 2016-2017 school year.
Detroit’s parents grades charter and public schools according to school safety, parental involvement, school climate, student achievement, and many other factors. The coalition provides a comprehensive online profile of the services, facilities, and special programs in each of Detroit’s schools. Nevertheless, only two parents reported using this online resource despite the vast research and great deal of money used to produce it. These two school choosers were well-connected and had heard about this online resource through their participation in leadership roles in school.

School choosers were more likely to undertake deliberate actions when selecting a school, demonstrating a “choice mindset” and prudent school selection behaviors (Stewart & Wolf, 2012). They visited schools to learn about their staff and programmatic offerings and to “interview” school personnel. In high crime Detroit, school choosers reported being most motivated by school safety, using school visits to inspect the physical conditions of a school and to learn about the student body. Along with possessing a choice orientation, parents who opted for schools of choice were older and more experienced than those who did not. These more experienced families described how their past experiences taught them how to navigate Detroit’s network of schools, finding the right fit for their children. In some cases, more experienced parents reported that when they were younger and less knowledgeable of the school system, they had not chosen the right schools for their eldest children but were now doing so with their younger children. Many younger parents in their early twenties did not have the benefit of such learning experiences. Along with broader experience, school choosers drew connections between their network as a source of information for learning about a safe school. The importance of social networks to facilitating school choice has been a
consistent finding in the literature (Neild, 2005), but whether a school chooser or non-chooser, most parents in this study had interpersonal networks of family, friends, and neighbors that they relied on for information. What was different about school choosers was that their networks were more efficacious, consisting of relationships with community organizations, school personnel, and other professional groups.

**Parental aspirations and commitment**

Parental aspirations stood out among school choosers. School choosers articulated high expectations for their children, strong commitment to education, and desire to find the best quality schools for their children. This preexisting commitment echoes previous work suggesting that academically inclined parents are more likely to engage in school choice (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014). To some extent, all parents communicated behaviors exemplifying commitment to their children’s education. Yet, school choosers not only demonstrated high aspirations but also detailed a range of activities that they undertook in support of the expectations that they communicated. School choosers sought out opportunities to participate in community organizations and schools. Some charter schools may help to raise parental expectations by extending school options and empowering families, but they do so with parents who possess higher levels of preexisting commitment than their public school peers.

_I took her to and from school and worked afternoons. I was PTA president for five years. I was involved with the elementary schools for years. Even when I had a day job, I never missed a parent-teacher conference. You have to establish a relationship with the teachers._

Parent, Selective enrollment public school

In comparing parents in neighborhood public schools to those at schools of choice, stark differences were drawn. Charter school parents were described in a positive...
light, whereas neighborhood public school parents were often described in uncomplimentary terms. Public school teachers noted that parents in neighborhood public schools were “party-going” and “more inclined to think about themselves than their kids,” whereas school choosers were more likely to be viewed as making an effort to improve their children’s lives under challenging circumstances. Public school teachers and parents also cited drug use, parental incarceration, absentee parents, child abuse, and other living circumstances associated with extreme disadvantage as being prevalent in their schools. Having had experience in parent leadership roles in neighborhood and selective enrollment public schools, one parent reflected on the home environments of some students in neighborhood public schools:

Some of the kids are from parents that are on drugs. Some people smoke weed with their kids, drink with their kids, take pills with their kids.
Parent, Selective enrollment public high school

The incidence of homelessness among students appeared to be much greater in the city’s neighborhood public schools (Grim et al., 2015). For homeless students attending neighborhood public schools, parents had abandoned their children or were in prison in many instances, and for students from these home backgrounds, school was often a place to get breakfast and lunch and to escape the street during the day. Many neighborhood public school students seemed to be highly mobile, moving from place to place in a state of semi-homelessness. The extraordinary home circumstances for youth in some of the city’s neighborhood public schools were described by a parent:

You got parents sending their kids to school smelling like pee, unwashed. My aunt (teaches in Detroit Public Schools) has to wash the kids at schools. A lot of the problems come from the parents. I just don’t understand how you can send your kids to school like this.
Parent, Charter elementary school
Transportation

Transportation was a major factor in differentiating school choosers and non-choosers. In Detroit, commuting to both public and charter schools of choice is largely the responsibility of a family (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). The lack of school transportation is relevant because many parents do not own cars (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). Several parents with children in neighborhood public schools explained that transportation issues impeded their ability to opt for schools outside of their neighborhood. Some high school students relied on car pools or public transit to get to a school of choice, but the city’s bus system was frequently unreliable and unsafe. Potential victimization during a child’s commute to a school of choice outside of neighborhood boundaries was a concern for parents. In cases where a school of choice was within walking distance to their residence, parents without transportation could opt for schools of choice. School proximity could then benefit some parents who might not otherwise have opted for a school of choice (Goldring & Philipps, 2008; Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011). One parent lamented that a lack of transportation had limited her options:

*I work a lot. I have to work day to night. I need something closer because I can’t drive them. Transportation to schools would make [school choice] easier.*

Parent, Neighborhood public elementary school

For some single working-mothers, proximity was a question of how close a school was to their place of work. Mothers dropped off and picked up their children at schools near their places of work, using their own cars or taking city transit together to do so. Choice schools were far from a family’s residence in some cases, but more importantly to some parents, were located near their workplaces. In Detroit, many new schools have established operations in downtown, midtown, and other commercial
sections of the city and may be nodes along parent work commutes as opposed to nodes within student neighborhood commutes. This apparent trend is notable (Lareua & Goyette, 2014) since these parents held jobs and, in some instances, had access to personal transportation. The differences between school-choosers and non-choosers meant that schools of choice appear to take in students from more advantaged home environments, conferring a self-selection advantage in fostering perceptions of school safety.

**Discussion**

In high crime cities with extensive school choice, perceived school safety is a primary driver of school selection for many families (Goldhaber, 1999; Lake et al., 2015; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Stewart & Wolf, 2012; Wilson et al., 2010). This study found certain charter school approaches that appear to promote higher perceived school safety. As reported in previous studies (Maranto & Ritter, 2014; Whitman, 2008; Zimmer & Gaurino, 2011), a number of charter schools stressed strict behavioral codes and orderly learning environments as part of enhancing perceived safety. These strategies were aided by greater flexibility in determining the makeup of the student body with charter schools having an easier process for expelling, counseling out, and deterring disruptive students (Jennings, 2010). Prior work finds no clear evidence that charter schools “crop” students with low achievement (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013; Lacireno et al., 2002), but in depressed cities where safety is an overriding priority and student performance is generally low, cropping practices may be tied to student behavior.

Some charter schools have been reported to use specific strategies to raise parental involvement (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Preston et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011). In
this study, charter schools sought a greater parent presence in school through volunteering, participation in school activities, and parental employment at school. The existence of parents in school seemed to increase perceived school safety by improving school climate. In emphasizing relationship-building and social connections in the school community, charter schools seemed to create a denser school community. Dense school communities may increase social capital by improving parental access to resources, raising parental aspirations, and establishing high standards for the school community (Coleman, 1988; Kirk & Sampson, 2010), ultimately leading to higher perceived school safety (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Kirk 2009). In addition, initiatives targeting enhanced social control together with strong community ties have been recommended for improving neighborhood-level safety and collective efficacy (Sampson, 2012). In the case of some charter schools in this study, the combination of school order and home-school relationships seemed to raise perceived school safety (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Although school approaches were partly attributable to safety perceptions, the preexisting attributes of school choosers appeared to confer an advantage to charter school in fostering perceived school safety. In differentiating school choosers from non-choosers, efficacious social networks, high aspirations, and age and experience were found to be advantageous characteristics of parents opting for schools of choice. Research indicates that committed school choosers with greater access to social resources may be more likely to support their children’s development, monitoring their academic progress and ensuring that they are well-behaved at school (Jones et al., 2009; Ozer & Weinsten, 2004; Schneider et al., 2002). Critics have long warned that charter schools would attract the most academically inclined and well-resourced parents – “creaming”
the best families (Dauter & Fuller, 2016; Levin, 1998). Charter schools in this study seemed to benefit from attracting more committed families. However, they also derived an advantage on indicators that schools in other less challenging settings might take for granted, such as having access to family transportation, no experience of parental incarceration, and no drug use in the home. Parental incarceration and drug use at home, in particular, have exhibited negative effects on a wide range of student outcomes (Bahr et al., 2005; Murray et al., 2012). In economically depressed cities, “creaming” seems to take on a different meaning than what scholars have previously articulated (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). The cumulative advantage of attracting school choosers may have a positive influence on school safety whereas cumulative disadvantage in neighborhood public schools may contribute to lowering it (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Skogan, 2015). As safety-seeking families depart neighborhood public schools, perceptions of school safety may rise in the schools that they choose while neighborhood public schools may be left to educate students with fewer home advantages and greater behavioral problems (Buras, 2011; Cowen, 2010; Howell, 2004). In this study, no single mechanism explained outcomes in charter schools with both parent and school characteristics relating to perceived school safety. As found in previous work (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006), a combination of school strategies and parent attributes seemed to be at play. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether charter schools would be able to maintain similar safety perceptions if they enrolled the same student body as that of neighborhood public schools. That is, the preexisting attributes of school choosers seem to have a disproportionate effect on perceptions of school safety.
Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research

One development stemming from choice reforms in cities like Detroit appears to be the activation of a “choice mindset” among parents (Bell, 2009; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012). A high proportion of Detroit’s parents now consider it a duty to seek out and spend considerable time inspecting prospective schools for their children while prioritizing school safety in their decision-making processes. Prior to charter school reforms, many of these same parents might have perfunctorily enrolled their children in their assigned neighborhood school. During the school application phase now, school choosers seem to be empowered to a degree with some charter schools serving as an important option for low-income minority families with high levels of commitment but without the economic and social resources needed to access other types of schools of choice (Maranto & Ritter, 2014). Advocates of charter school reforms in deindustrialized cities may then argue that charter schools have expanded safe options for economically disadvantaged African American families that did not exist before.

On the other hand, empowerment tends to be restricted to parents who have the inclination and ability to participate in school choice (Archbald, 2004; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012; Smith et al., 2011) while students from truly disadvantaged circumstances have far less opportunity to gain access to schools of choice (Buras, 2011; Cowen, 2010; Howell, 2004; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). As a result, highly disadvantaged students appear to congregate in neighborhood public schools that students of more well-resourced families flee (Bell, 2009). This process of parental sorting raises questions about the educational opportunities for students who do not possess home advantages that enable
participation in school choice (Buras, 2011; Cowen, 2010; Howell, 2004; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). Opponents of school choice may claim that choice dynamics worsen public education for students with the greatest needs. As students with the greatest educational needs and fewest home resources will likely continue to attend neighborhood public schools, neighborhood public schools may be a last resort for students dealing with extraordinary problems of poverty, homelessness, parental incarceration, and other highly challenging family circumstances (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Hagan & Foster, 2012). Community and school policies beyond choice may be needed. Major government and non-government initiatives reaching over one billion dollars in funding are ongoing (e.g. Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiatives, Good Neighborhoods Initiative, Hardest Hit Fund). In challenging settings, school safety strategies may be reinforced by community-level initiatives (Sampson, 2012). To improve safety perceptions in neighborhood schools, seeking ways to build relationships and increase the parent presence in school during the day may provide a means of enhancing perceived school safety. Restoring school buildings in neighborhood public schools may also help to improve student and staff morale, perceptions of social control, and overall school climate (Cyr, 2014). Furthermore, creating fairer and more efficient school selection processes may be beneficial. In Detroit, the recent roll out of common enrollment for the city’s charter schools may be a step in the right direction (Gross, DeArmond, & Denice, 2015). However, much more is needed to improve awareness of and access to schools. Even with expanded access to information, transportation remains a need for more equitable participation in school choice since many families are excluded from school options because they do not own a
car or have access to reliable public transit. How new transportation arrangements might be organized is uncertain in deindustrialized cities daunted by debt, financial turmoil, and poor public transit and may be an area of future inquiry.

This study offers an important analysis of the factors underlying perceived school safety among demographically similar families in deindustrialized cities with extensive school choice. It further existing scholarship by offering a more nuanced understanding of within-group selection processes, which may be important for rigorously evaluating school choice reforms in depressed cities (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rose & Stein, 2014). Future research may seek to control the self-selection factors reported in this study. First, access to transportation may be an important control since a large number of depressed cities with extensive choice arrangements make commutes to and from school a family responsibility. Second, broad social networks are important but certain components of interpersonal networks are more effective than others for participating in school choice (Fleming et al., 2015). The type of school, professional, and community group associations possessed by parents may be important in accounting for selection. Third, parental age may be another key control since older, more experienced parents seem to have greater access to information, professional networks, and other social resources. Finally, preexisting aspirations may be the most prominent feature of school choosers. A well-developed literature demonstrates that parental aspirations have large statistical effects on student outcomes (Jeynes, 2005, 2011, 2012), possibly making differences in parent aspirations between choosers and non-choosers, a key source of selection bias.
Chapter 5

Conclusion
Summary of Findings

In the first study, charter and public schools were compared on perceived school safety. Charter schools exhibited statistically higher perceived school safety, net of controls for neighborhood, school, and student demographic characteristics. However, the relationship between charter schools and perceived school safety was diminished after accounting for parent-related characteristics (i.e. student commute distance and parental involvement). Additional analyses disaggregated schools into the following categories: commuter charter, commuter public, neighborhood charter, and neighborhood public. Commuter charter and public schools and neighborhood charter schools had higher perceived school safety, less reported crime in school and less reported violent crime in school. When parental involvement was controlled, only neighborhood charter schools remained statistically higher on perceived school safety. To contextualize this result, neighborhood public schools with below average perceived school safety were compared to the nearest charter schools. It was found that the nearest charter school had, on average, statistically higher perceived school safety.

In the second study, non-profit managed charter schools and for-profit managed charter schools and their public school peers were compared on a general measure of parental involvement and a measure of parent decision-making. Results showed that non-profit managed charter schools elicited higher rates of general parental involvement, net of student demographic factors, school characteristics, and student commute distance. Public schools, however, generated higher rates of parent participation in school decision-making, using the same controls. The results suggested that charter schools may
experience higher rates of parental involvement but may view parents as supporters of school strategies as opposed partners in decision-making.

The overall statistical results of the first two studies indicated that a combination of school strategies and preexisting attributes of school choosers may underpin charter school performance. In the third study, the factor underlying perceived school safety were examined by exploring differentiating school characteristics and distinguishing features of school choosers through in-depth interviews with parents and teachers and site observations. Interviews revealed certain charter school strategies that may positively influence perceived school safety. Non-profit managed charter schools, in particular, enabled greater parental involvement by stressing relationship building (parent-parent and home-school) and social connections (family events and socials) in the school community. Charter schools’ parental involvement strategies also facilitated a greater parent presence in school. The combination of school community relationships and a parent presence on school grounds appeared to have a knock-on effect for enhancing perceptions of school safety in charter schools. Charter schools, on average, seemed to have more flexibility to shape their student bodies, allowing charter schools to enroll relatively well-behaved students from committed families, whereas the most disadvantaged students living in extraordinary home circumstances tended to end up in neighborhood public schools.

Even though institutional factors were partly attributable to charter school performance, the preexisting attributes of school choosers appeared to have substantial influence on perceived school safety, parental involvement, and overall school performance. Despite sharing a similar socio-demographic profile with non-choosers,
school choosers were distinguished by efficacious social networks, high aspirations and commitment, and age and experience. The differentiating characteristics between school choosers and non-choosers also seemed to be differences that more advantaged school communities might take for granted. School choosers, for instance, were more likely to have access to family transportation and less likely to have experiences of parental incarceration and drug use in the home. Taken together, the home advantages of students of school choosers conferred an advantage to schools of choice relative to neighborhood public schools.

**Research Contributions**

In deindustrialized cities, problems of crime, poverty, urban decay, and family dissolution shape the context for public education, presenting considerable challenges for schools (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Sugrue, 2014; US Department of Education, 2015). As charter school reforms have advanced across deindustrialized cities, charter schools have been promoted as a lever for school improvement in these settings. By conducting a mixed methods comparison of charter and public schools on perceived school safety and parental involvement in a high choice deindustrialized city, this thesis makes a number of key contributions to the literature that are outlined below.

**Safety-seeking Families**

In deindustrialized cities, crime and victimization are major concerns for families and school communities. State and national policies connect school choice to school safety and local school communities have also routinely cited school safety as a central objective for charter school reforms (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012; Archbald, 2004;
Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Cucchiara, 2013; Davis & Oakley, 2013; Horn & Miron, 2000; Lake, Jochim, & DeArmond, 2015; Wilson, Marshall, Wilson, Krizek, 2010). Although research comparing charter and public schools has emphasized standardized test scores, perceived school safety takes precedence in school choice decisions over many other factors, including academic achievement. In this thesis, statistical results hinted that families sought safe havens through school choice while subsequent qualitative findings from interviews with parents and teachers confirmed that safety is a top priority for school choosers and the primary driving force behind parents’ school decisions.

**Within-group Variation in Choice Processes**

Previous research has indicated that low-income minority families engage in school choice at lower rates than their counterparts (Dauter & Fuller, 2016). Yet, a large proportion of low-income African American families participate in school choice in deindustrialized cities (Buckley & Schneider, 2005; Goldring & Philipps, 2008; US Department of Education, 2015). Among demographically similar families, there is much within-group variation in school choice participation. In engaging in school choice, school choosers seemed to have developed a “choice mindset” that was activated through charter school reforms. For school choosers, selecting a school entailed school site visits and inspections, interviews with school personnel, online research, and an expectation that schools should meet the parent needs. This shift in thinking about school selection among school choosers has potentially different implications. On one hand, families who may not have had options otherwise seem to be empowered by choice to some extent. On the other hand, education is increasingly viewed as private good with parents selecting
schools as they might do so when determining whether to purchase a product. It is uncertain what precise implications of this shift in mindset might be and to what extent it might be attributable to advancing or hindering the provision of public education in deindustrialized cities. One potential outcome seems to be a widening within-group division between those who can and do choose and those who cannot and do not (Scott, 2016).

**Parental Sorting Mechanisms and a Tiered Educational System**

Corresponding to within-group variation, charter school reforms appear to have deepened sorting processes. Statistically, school choosers traveled longer distances to schools and participated at higher rates in their children’s education. Qualitatively, school choosers were distinguished by access to transportation, high aspirations and commitment, age and experience, and formal social networks. Differences between school choosers and non-choosers were also more closely related to factors that other school communities may take for granted, such as basic employment, no drug use in the home, and no experience of parental incarceration. On the supply side, sorting mechanisms were evident. By enforcing strict behavioral policies and shaping their student bodies, charter schools seemed able to “crop” students more easily than their public school peers were able to. Schools perceived as safe environments attracted families with initiative to seek out schools, awareness of informational resources, and means to commute outside of their neighborhood. Students of relatively advantaged families found their way to selective enrollment public and high performing charter schools while the city’s most vulnerable students without such home resources ended up in the city’s neighborhood public schools.
In high choice inner cities, the process of sorting contributes to a multilayered educational hierarchy (Cucchiara, 2008). In the case of Detroit, schools stratify into top-performing selective enrollment public schools and then high performing charter schools that excel in helping students progress through and onto university. Underneath these schools are neighborhood charter schools whose results are lower than the top-tier public and charter schools. At the very bottom of the educational hierarchy, neighborhood public schools constitute the lowest performing schools. These schools are beset by high rates of campus crime, poor building conditions, poor student performance and general disorder. Students in this stratum of schools seem to face the greatest challenges to educational success.

**Controls for Self-selection Bias**

Within-group sorting processes suggest that broad controls for income or race may not adequately capture differences between school choosers and non-choosers. Self-selection bias is likely to remain a challenge for researchers seeking valid comparisons between charter and public schools. Parental sorting processes occurring in Detroit revealed distinguishing attributes of school choosers that may bias school effects substantially when uncontrolled. Future work may be able to mitigate self-selection bias by including controls for parents’ access to transportation, aspirations and commitment, age and experience, and formal social networks. Furthermore, in cities with high rates of crime, survey measures of safety precautions taken by families may be useful in controlling for selection bias in comparisons of charter and public schools on perceived school safety.

**Differences among Charter Schools by Educational Management Organization**
Charter schools represent a diverse group of schools (Brown et al., 2005; Henig et al., 2004). One of the important distinctions in this study was between non-profit managed and for-profit managed charter schools. Relative to the strategies of for-profit managed charter schools, non-profit managed charter schools placed emphasis on relationship building in their approaches to parents. Approaches used by non-profit managed charter schools, such as socials, evening dinners, and parent-parent and home-school relationship building strategies. These approaches suggest ways that schools in challenging settings might develop human and social capital within the school community, raise parental access to information and resources, increase parental aspirations, and establish high standards for the school community (Coleman, 1988).

Observed differences by management type found in this thesis add to the existing literature, indicating that charter schools are not a uniform mass, but rather, develop different institutional characteristics that correspond to management type (Henig et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2005).

**Differences in Parental Involvement Strategies between Charter and Public Schools**

Parental involvement has long been connected to student outcomes in inner cities where school choice reforms have been viewed as a lever for empowering parents and increasing parent participation (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Smith et al., 2011). This study found that charter and public schools emphasize different facets of parental involvement. Charter schools elicited parental involvement related to learning at home, communication, and volunteering. Public schools, on the other hand, exhibited higher rates of parent decision-making than charter schools. These findings indicated that parents who opt for a school of choice may be tacitly accepting the existing
strategies of a school. This tacit agreement may lead to less emphasis on shared decision-making in charter schools. Evidence from interviews with parents and teachers demonstrated that charter schools tend to view parents as supporters of school decisions as opposed to partners in shared decision-making. Public schools had long-standing formal structures, such as parent-teacher organizations, that appeared to provide channels for parent decision-making. In high choice school systems where community control of schools is already reduced, the impact of lower rates of parent decision-making in charter schools is not certain and scholarship examining the effects of parent decision-making has showed mixed results (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016).

The findings generated from this study reveal a web of complex interactions activated by school choice. In deindustrialized cities, school choosers demonstrate preexisting attributes unobserved by broad categories of race and class that impel and aid them in seeking out schools of choice for their children. In seeking out schools, families’ school choice decisions are primarily driven by perceived school safety although academic performance, school offerings, and other factors weigh into the decision-making process. Given the prioritization of school safety, charter schools seek to attract families by enhancing perceptions of safety through various school strategies. By receiving in-flows of self-selecting families with the motivation and resources to participate in school choice, charter schools derive a self-selection advantage in the areas of school safety and parental involvement. While this type of parental sorting has long taken place in cities through magnet and selective enrollment schools, parental sorting is deepened through charter school reforms. A multi-layered hierarchy of schools is formed
that leaves neighborhood public schools with the task of educating the most vulnerable students with the fewest home resources. Based on perceived safety and parental involvement, charter schools do offer a modest improvement for many low-income minority families. However, charter schools are mostly inaccessible to the most disadvantaged students with fewest home resources. Charter schools thus achieve results with a student population that is relatively advantaged compared to that of neighborhood public schools.

**Policy Implications and Directions for Future Research**

The results of this thesis have important implications for educational policy and future research. These implications are outlined below.

**Improving School Safety**

Student perceptions of safety are tightly linked to numerous academic and developmental outcomes as well as measures of actual school violence and victimization on school campuses (Hanson & Voight, 2014; Ripsky & Gregogy, 2009; Skiba et al., 2006; Whitlock, 2006). Many schools in this study reported low perceived school safety while actual reported crimes on school grounds at a number of neighborhood public schools were relatively high. Continued work is likely needed to ensure school safety in deindustrialized cities with high crime rates. Whether driven by preexisting parent attributes or school strategies, the relationship between parental involvement and school safety observed in this study may have important policy implications as school-led initiatives aimed at bolstering parental involvement in charter and public schools may be a means of improving school safety (Jones et al., 2009; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Specifically, strategies targeting parent volunteering may improve
student perceptions of safety by fostering an increased parent presence on school grounds while school supports for parenting practices may lead to improved student behavior at school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Relationship building initiatives at both community and school levels may also improve school climate, leading to enhanced perceived school safety. Such efforts could bear fruit even in neighborhood public schools facing the most intractable safety problems but would likely require sustained work on the ground to build relationships with families and local communities.

Some comprehensive safety initiatives are ongoing. Detroit Public Schools has undertaken a number of safety strategies since 2010, creating school safety hubs, increasing security and monitoring, initiating volunteer patrols along student commutes, and extending school hours and days on which parents and students are able to access health and social services at some schools (Detroit Public Schools, 2013). These initiatives may affect safety perceptions in unintended ways (Cornell & Mayer, 2010; Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015; Skiba et al., 2006). Heightened monitoring and policing may reduce actual victimization but raise levels of fear. Although the effects of specific safety initiatives are not examined in this study, whether certain types of safety measures have had a positive effect on school safety may be an area of future study that would inform the results of this study.

**Increasing Access and Creating a Fairer Process**

School choice is theoretically meant to allow all parents an opportunity to seek out quality schools for their children (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Drake, 2000; Nathan, 1996). In practice, however, charter schools are not accessible to many families in high choice deindustrialized cities (Scott, 2016). A large number of
families are perplexed by different application procedures for schools and overwhelmed by a highly differentiated system that requires a substantial time commitment to fully understand school options (Stewart & Wolf, 2012). To raise access to schools, a fairer school selection process may be needed in cities with extensive choice. While common enrollment for all charter schools in cities, such as Detroit and New Orleans, may help extend access to information, improve awareness, and streamline confusing processes (Gross, DeArmond, & Denice, 2015), vast differences between parental access are likely to persist. Research on the use of housing vouchers among low-income minority families finds that counseling services help to facilitate participation in voucher programs (DeLuca, Garboden, Rosenbaltt, 2012). Such services are currently delivered at parent resource centers throughout Detroit but it is not known whether these centers extend access to families most in need of information. The online school profiles generated by Excellent Schools Detroit on perceived school safety, academic performance, special programs, transportation services, and other school characteristics provide the most comprehensive resource for information on Detroit’s schools. This study found that very few parents had even heard of Excellent School Detroit. Such providers of information on schools may consider ways to expand outreach to a wider range of families, possibly diversifying the modes of communication used to connect with the school community.

Even with renewed efforts to increase school access, a lack of transportation remains one of the greatest obstacles to participation in school choice. Many families not only do not have a car but also have limited access to public transportation. It does not help that in depopulated cities like Detroit, cities are geographically large relative to a vastly reduced population. How transportation could be extended to more families is
uncertain though – Detroit and many other deindustrialized cities face severe financial constraints. One possible avenue might be enhanced coordination among city transit authorities, public schools, and charter schools. A coordinated carpooling system might be another method to raise access. A central authority for the city’s public and charter could hypothetically support the coordination of school transportation. Any such commission would likely require political balance with appointees from both the charter and public school sectors in equal numbers. Still, even if coordination is improved, more is likely to be needed to optimize access to schools. Cost-efficient ways of improving transportation options in high choice cities may be a key area for future study.

**Channeling Resources to Neighborhood Public Schools**

Neighborhood public schools educate students facing extraordinary obstacles to educational and life success (DeLuca, Garboden, Rosenbaltt, 2012). These schools have the most substantial resource needs. At the state level, the appetite for increasing school funding for Detroit’s public schools seems to be lacking. Taking into account federal, state, and local funds, Detroit Public Schools receives approximately $18,600 in per pupil funding – a much larger sum than almost every other school district in the state (Gantert, 2015). Since new funding for Detroit’s schools is unlikely to be a political winner for many of the state’s politicians within their own local constituencies, redirecting district resources to neighborhood public schools may be one consideration. At present, Detroit Public Schools seems to allocate a disproportionate share of resources to its high prestige selective enrollment schools. Although the existence of these elite schools may help to stem student losses to other schools of choice (Hamlin & Davies, 2016), it may be time to reconsider the current funding model given circumstances in neighborhood public
While the potential for new sources of funding that might allow high needs schools to hire more paraprofessionals or other support staff are unlikely, there may be ways to strengthen school connections to social service and health agencies through ongoing Community Schools initiatives (Data Driven Detroit, 2013; Detroit Public Schools, 2013). Another issue is what resources are needed most. Should the focus of funds for neighborhood public schools prioritize social work, safety, and socio-emotional well-being over math and literacy skills? Should structural improvements to school buildings be given precedence? Alternatively, are greater community-level investments a precondition for improvement in neighborhood schools? This study does not address these questions, but it does raise these issues for future research. It is worth noting that major government and non-government community-level initiatives reaching over one billion dollars are presently underway throughout Detroit (e.g. Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiatives, Good Neighborhoods Initiative, Hardest Hit Fund).

**Suspending the Establishment of New Charter Schools and Enhancing Oversight**

In Detroit and other cities with high proportions of students enrolled in charter schools, it may be time to allow the marketplace for schools a chance to stabilize by putting a pause on the creation of new charter schools. Even though a cap on charter schools may create a barrier to market forces that supporters of choice may decry, there are nearly 100 charter schools in Detroit and many other charter schools in working class suburbs ringing the city. Even the most ardent supporters of choice might then agree that this number of schools is sufficient for the current student population to allow choice and competition to flourish without the creation of new schools. In the near term, suspending the founding of new charter schools would allow time to streamline school choice.
processes, find ways to increase parent access to schools, eliminate underperforming charter schools, and stabilize in- and out-flows of students in both charter and public schools. A pause on new charter schools could also induce lawmakers to revisit aspects of charter school legislation that are unclear. Evidence from this thesis also indicates a need for state legislation to clarify expulsion policies for charter schools and for oversight to ensure expulsion protocols are appropriately met when students are expelled. Such improvements could benefit existing charter and public schools and the families that they serve.

Concluding Remarks

Advocates of school choice elevated the charter school movement by asserting that charter schools would be able to fundamentally improve public education. As the movement gained steam, many of its most dedicated supporters touted charter schools as a lever for vastly enhancing educational opportunities for the most disadvantaged students in inner cities (Scott, 2016). Following from over two decades of research, many choice advocates have begun to change their tone, greatly tempering previous pronouncements about the many benefits of charter schools in challenging cities. Supporters are now more apt to remind the public that to reap the long-term benefits of choice and competition, short-term chaos, political strain, and loss are unavoidable necessities (Peterson, 2016). Replacing overstated claims with more balanced expectations may be helpful. Along with this change in tone, solid bi-partisan political support for charter schools also seems to be dissipating (Scott, 2016). Long-time charter school supporter Hillary Clinton (D) seemed to criticize aspects of charter schools during her run for the presidency in 2016 (Klein, 2015). Under a new climate of tempered
expectations for charter schools, renewed political debate over charter schools may be beneficial but not necessarily to re-litigate previous debates about whether charter schools should exist or not. By enrolling millions of students, charter schools are likely to remain a well-entrenched fixture on the educational landscape for years to come. Renewed debate may help to develop more prudent measures for regulating charter schools, improving coordination among charter and public schools in cities, closing chronically underperforming charter schools, and spurring deeper consideration of the complex range of social dynamics unleashed by charter school reforms in depressed cities.

In deindustrialized cities, school safety is a key driving force behind school choice processes. Experimental research has shown that the main reason parents living in high poverty inner-city neighborhoods choose to take up housing vouchers is the opportunity to move to a safer neighborhood (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008; Katz, 2015). It is not entirely surprising that the prioritization of safety extends to educational choices with committed families in high-crime environments seeking out safety when selecting schools. Even though student achievement remains an important indicator of school performance, the disproportionate scholarly emphasis on test outcomes offers a very narrow evaluation of charter school reforms in deindustrialized cities. A parent seeking to escape school violence through school choice may be entirely satisfied in a safe charter school irrespective of the school’s academic performance. Investigation of context-bound indicators of school performance may offer a more complete evaluation of charter school reforms. As a precondition for such new research, careful reflection on the surrounding context within which charter schools operate may be important.
In evaluating local priorities of school safety and parental involvement in a deindustrialized city, this mixed methods study finds that charter schools offer modest improvement on the outcomes of interest but not the fundamental change that some committed school choice advocates had anticipated. School choice supporters may regard the results of this study as progress on which to build (Peterson, 2016) while others may view marginal gains as reason to shift the public policy focus away from school choice reforms to a broader emphasis on community-level social and economic reforms (Bryk et al, 2010; Sampson, 2012; Scott, 2016). Determining which course of action deserves emphasis in future policy is beyond the scope of this study, but conceivably, reforms sought at different levels are not necessarily mutually exclusive of one another and may even serve as an area of political compromise.
Appendix
Interview Protocols: Parents

A. School and Commute Information

1. What school does your child attend?
   What grade is your child in?

2. How does your child typically get to school?
   e.g. family car, school bus, public transit, car pool, other

3. Could you tell about the school? Is it public or charter?
   Does it have a specific focus?

B. School Choice and Parent Decision-making

1. How did you hear about (current school)? How is (current school)’s reputation?

   Examples: Local assigned school, Family or friends, Online / Website, Person from school, Advertisement, Other

2. Why did you decide on (current school) school? Was it your first choice? Why or why not?

   Examples: Safety, Test scores, Sports, Child’s friends, Values of school, Close to home, Special focus of school, Discipline in school, School size, Good teachers

3. How do you generally get information about schools?

   What resources currently help families decide on a school in Detroit?

   What things would help families make better decisions?

   Are there any problems with Detroit’s current system?

4. Will you be looking at schools for your child in the future? If so, how will get information about those schools?

5. What do you look for in your ideal school?

C. Perceived School Safety

1. How would you rate safety as your child’s school? What makes it safe/unsafe?

   Do parents play any role in the safety of the school?
2. How did you know the school you chose was safe? What is the neighborhood like?

Are you satisfied with the current level of safety at the school?

3. How does pick up and drop off work?

4. What things does the school do to ensure students are safe?

Examples: security personnel, surveillance, parents in the building, monitoring

How does compare with your other school experiences?

D. Parental involvement

1. How is the school with parents?

2. What types of parental involvement activities does the school do? Which have attended?

Examples: school information, volunteering, parent workshops, PTA parent-teacher conference, parent-child reading, parent-child homework, social events

Did you do these things before enrolling your child at (current school)? Would you be able to do this at any school or at other schools your child has attended?

Does the school have parent contracts? Does the school hire parents?

2. Do you communicate with school personnel? How do you communicate with the school?

Do you tend to initiate communication with the school? Or the school?

3. How does your school try to involve parents?

Is current school good at getting parents involved?

4. Did you do these things before enrolling your child at current school?

Would you be able to do this at any school or at other schools your child has attended?

5. Are you satisfied with how your school interacts with you?
What does it do well? Not so well?

E. Academics

1. Do you feel like your child is getting a good education?

G. Comments

Do you have thoughts or comments? Anything that you would like to share that I did not cover in the interview?

Interview Protocols: Teachers

A. School Information

1. What school are you at?
   What grade do you teach?

2. Could you tell about the school?
   Is it public or charter?
   Does it have a specific focus?

3. How do students typically get to school?
   e.g. family car, school bus, public transit, car pool, other

4. What is (current school)’s reputation?

5. How would you describe the school administration? Like a typical school?

C. Perceived School Safety

1. How would you rate safety as the school?

2. What makes it safe/unsafe?
   Do parents play any role in the safety of the school?

3. Does the school have any specific safety strategies?
   Examples: security personnel, surveillance, parents in the building, monitoring
   How does the school safety strategies compare with your experiences at other school?
Does the school do something different, special, or unique that other schools you have been at don’t do?

Are the programs, community connections, parent partnerships that influence safety?

How does pick up and drop off work?

4. Does the school ever expel students?

How does expulsion work? Does your school receive expelled students from other schools?

D. Parental involvement

1. How is the school with parents?

2. What are the expectations for teachers with respect to parents?

3. What types of parental involvement activities does the school do?

   Examples: school information, volunteering, parent workshops, PTA parent-teacher conference, parent-child reading, parent-child homework, social events

   Did you do these things before at other schools you have taught at? Why or why not?

   Does the school have parent contracts? Does the school hire parents?

4. How does your school try to involve parents?

Is (school name) good at getting parents involved? Why or why not?

Would you be able to do this at any school or at other schools your child has attended?

Do you tend to initiate communication with the school? Or do parents?

E. Academics

1. Do you feel like your students are getting a good education?

G. Comments

Do you have thoughts or comments? Anything that you would like to share that I did not cover in the interview?
References
References


Blum, R. W., McNeely, C., & Rinehart, P. M. (2002). *Improving the odds: The untapped
power of schools to improve the health of teens. Minneapolis: Center for Adolescent Health and Development. University of Minnesota.


Data Driven Detroit (2012, Oct. 15). *Detroit system of schools, then and now*. Presented at Detroit Schools-Higher Education Consortium Meeting, Detroit, MI.


Hanson, T. L., Austin, G., & Lee-Bayha, J. (2004). *Ensuring that no child is left*
behind: How are student health risks and resilience related to the academic progress of schools?. WestED (NJ3). Retrieved from http://surveydata.wested.org/resources/EnsuringNCLB.pdf


Kann, L., Kinchen, S., Shanklin, S. L., et al. (2014). Youth risk behavior surveillance-


Scott, J. (2016). The politics of market-based education reform. In William Mathis and


Stein, M., Goldring, E., & Smerkar, C. (2012). Dynamics of parent involvement in urban...


