



# Perceptions of Safety, Satisfaction with Neighborhood and Life Satisfaction Among Chilean Adolescents

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## Abstract

The perception of safety and neighborhood satisfaction are related to children and adolescents' life satisfaction. Most previous studies have examined these variables separately. However, studies are yet to determine the direct or indirect simultaneous interactions among these variables, limiting our understanding of the mechanism (s) that underline adolescents' life satisfaction. We tested a mediation model using a structural equation modeling in a sample of 808 Chileans adolescents (42.2% female; mean age: 12.5). Our results demonstrate a direct effect of perceptions of safety at home and in the community upon life satisfaction. Similarly, we found an indirect effect through neighborhood satisfaction on adolescents' life satisfaction. Our results highlight a relationship between safety and life satisfaction, incorporating neighborhood satisfaction among adolescents. Therefore, we suggest safety prevention programs should include community components, such as neighborhood satisfaction, given its relationship with life satisfaction during adolescence.

**Keywords** Life satisfaction · Neighborhood · Safety · Adolescents

## 1 Children's and Adolescent's Subjective Well-Being

Worldwide, the study of subjective well-being a concept that includes life satisfaction, has attracted the attention of many researchers interested on the factors that could affect

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the lives of children and young individuals (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014). Petito and Cummins (2000) have defined subjective well-being as an individual self-assessment on life quality comprising two elements: satisfaction, which implies a cognitive self-evaluation, and emotion, which involves feelings and the person's mood.

The relevance of studying subjective well-being in children and adolescents is derived from its strong association with positive physical and mental health outputs, positive interpersonal relationships and educational and professional success (Park 2004), and by its negative association with risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, violence, aggression, sexual victimization, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, low self-esteem and disharmony over social relationships (Proctor et al. 2010; Suldo and Huebner 2004; Valois et al. 2004; Valois et al. 2009).

Family, school and neighborhood are crucial factors to understand subjective well-being (Goswami 2012; Oberle et al. 2011). However, the study of subjective well-being research on children and adolescents, and more specifically the impact of factors linked to their developmental contexts (family, school and neighborhood) are still in its infancy, this is especially true for Latin American, underdeveloped countries, including Chile (Alfaro et al. 2016a, 2016b; Siyez and Kaya 2008; Yiengprugsawan et al. 2010). A few published studies have included Chilean samples, for example Lee and Yoo (2015) observed that the neighborhood, along with relationships with family and peers, have a significant explanatory power of well-being, and above the economic variables of the country of origin in 12-year-old adolescents. Even though these studies did not find differences among countries, they report that family, school and community associated variables are an important part of the variance within countries. Yet, the specific mechanism (s) to understand these relationships are still missing. Studies have previously highlighted the importance of contextual variables that influence the subjective well-being of children and adolescents, however there is a persistent need for a better understanding on how the neighborhood and the community might affect the subjective well-being of this population, especially in developing countries such as Chile. Moreover, the influence of other features like satisfaction with the community or feeling safe is still unknown. Although evidently neighborhood and community are not equivalent (O'Brien and Ayidiya 1991; Chaskin 1997), we are not making a distinction between these terms for the purposes of our study.

## 2 Neighborhood and Well-Being

A systematic review by Sellström and Bremberg (2006) highlights the effect of opportunities and limitations in the context of the neighborhood upon children and adolescents' well-being. In particular, the authors describe the effect of socioeconomic status and social climate over a series of children's mental health variables highlighting the relevance of this dimension for their development. Likewise, Coulton and Korbin (2007) demonstrate that neighborhood's conditions and characteristics have a significant effect upon well-being, also some disparities are observed between low-income versus wealthy family neighborhoods. For example, a study by Cicognani et al. (2008), reported that Italian adolescents that lived in a city with several indicators of vulnerability including low economic and industrial level, a shortage of job opportunities for young people, absence of shopping centers, limited number of recreational facilities

and few education and health services experienced lower levels of residential satisfaction.

Relationships between neighbors are important for children and adolescents' well-being (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Paxton et al. (2006) observed an association between opportunities for attachment links with adults in the neighborhood and higher levels of life satisfaction among students in the United States. Further, according to Coulton and Spilsbury (2014) relationships between neighbors are social spaces that affect well-being, and key elements for the development of policies and programs aimed at childhood and adolescents.

Other psychosocial neighborhood factors have demonstrated associations to children and adolescents' well-being. Indeed, positive associations between integration into the neighborhood, well-being and health of its members have been reported in Latin American countries (Delgado et al. 2012; Gracia and Herrero 2006). Conversely, low levels of well-being, low mental health and low sense of community have been reported in Canada (Farrell et al. 2004). Other studies have linked participation in the community and well-being (Herrero and Gracia 2007) also, participation in community organizations and life satisfaction (Aminzadeh et al. 2013), or belonging to community organizations and well-being (Cicognani et al. 2015). Indeed, studies by Rodrigues et al. (2014), and Elvas and Moniz (2010) support the association between sense of belonging and well-being in children and adolescents from Brazil and Portugal. In Japan, Taniguchi and Potter (2016) described a positive effect of relationships with neighbors and life satisfaction, after adjusting for safety and services in the neighborhood. In the United States (US), Shin and colleagues (Shin et al. 2010) found that neighborhood satisfaction was a significant predictor for life satisfaction in a sample of 158 early adolescents. Also in the US, Valois et al. (2018) found similar results using neighborhood stress and focusing on a sample of 1658 African American adolescents.

Previous studies have highlighted the relationship between well-being and positive/negative indicators of the neighborhood. However, only a few studies have considered levels of safety in the neighborhood, a measure that can have significant effects on well-being, especially on South American populations of children and adolescents.

### 3 Perceptions of Safety and Well-Being

For children and adolescents safety is related to experiencing lack of violence over different contexts such as home, school and community. In fact, safety is an important dimension of their life quality associated to a variety of positive indicators (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014; González-Carrasco et al. 2018; Proctor et al. 2009; Sleet and Mercy 2003). For instance, Milam et al. (2010) found that the perception of neighborhood safety or violence was significantly related to academic achievement among 3rd and 8th graders in the U.S. Moreover, feeling safe at home also contributes to a better life satisfaction. Similarly, Joronen and Åstedt-Kurki (2005) found that feeling safe at home was a family factor related to positive well-being, and one of the significant predictors among adolescents. Consequently, feeling safe at home and in the neighborhood are both important contextual conditions that foster positive life satisfaction (Proctor et al. 2009).

In Chile, previous studies of children and adolescents' safety have largely focused at schools (Ministerio del Interior, 2014; Varela et al. 2017), dismissing the levels of

safety in other contexts, such as home or the community. Despite this, recent national reports in Chile indicate that 65% of children have witnessed violence in their community during the last year, and 7% in their own family home. This report is based on a national study and a sample of 19,867 (Ministerio de Interior 2017), and highlights the key role of safety at home and in the community upon youth development.

Hence, safety is an important predictor for children and adolescents' well-being (Gal 2014; Schwab-Stone et al. 1995; Sleet and Mercy 2003). Ben-Arieh and Shimoni (2014) described the importance of feelings of safety in different settings including neighborhood, home and school examining a sample of 2238 children aged 10–12. In particular, the feeling of safety was related to Student's Life Satisfaction Scale and to Overall Life Satisfaction explaining 40.2% and 27.6% of the variance, respectively. Moore and Ramirez (2016) examined data from the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) including a sample of 34,152 and found that adverse childhood experiences during infancy reduced the levels of safety and can have negative effects on children's well-being. More importantly, this study highlighted partial mediators of this relationship such as living in a safe neighborhood, among others.

International comparisons show differences among countries regarding their levels of neighborhood satisfaction and feeling of safety. For instance, the first wave of the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB) (Dinisman and Ress 2014), involved more than 34,000 children and adolescents aged 8, 10 and 12 from 14 countries and showed low satisfaction levels in the item "people living in their neighborhood" for most countries, especially in Chile ( $M = 6.7$ ), South Africa ( $M = 6.9$ ) and Uganda ( $M = 6.4$ ). In addition, approximately a half of the surveyed from Brazil (49.5%), South Africa (48.1%), South Korea (34%) and Uganda (46.6%) agree to feeling safe when they walk in the area they live in. Accordingly, the second wave of the international IscWeb project used a 1 to 10 points scale for neighborhood satisfaction and found values that ranged from 7.8 in South Africa and Germany to 9.4 in Norway, Finland and Romania (Rees 2017). Moreover, 25% of children in South Africa did not agree with the claim "feel safe in the neighborhood", compared to 1%–2% in Finland and Norway, respectively. The diversity of participants' experience regarding evaluation of their neighborhood, calls for studies on the specific context of each country in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the relationships among safety, neighborhood assessment and subjective well-being (Rees 2017).

To illustrate this point, a qualitative study by Adams and Savahl (2016) observed the presence of important safety concerns in the neighborhood, considering different recreations spaces, as places of danger and threat for adolescents aged 12 to 14 years coming from three socioeconomically diverse communities in Cape Town, South Africa,

The perception of safety in different contexts may also differ according to the different social agents involved. Ben-Arieh et al. (2009) analyzed data from U.S. fifth graders considering their parents and teachers using three different waves of data and an average sample of 1573 students. Interestingly, they found that teachers perceived a safer environment in the school context and surroundings compared to students and their families. In the current study, we focused on children perception of safety levels in their homes and communities assessing self-reported levels of well-being.

Therefore, levels of safety in the community may affect children and adolescents' well-being (Coulton and Spilsbury 2014). Yet, a complete understanding of this dynamic is still missing, specifically, regarding the association between the perception

of home and neighborhood security of children and adolescents and life satisfaction. As pointed, previous studies suggest a positive association between perceptions of safety and subjective well-being, however only a few studies have been performed on other cultural contexts such as South America. Perhaps one of the few studies that have gone deeper into the relationships between children's perception of safety and SWB is the article by Steckermeier (2017). In addition, the relevance of gender and age differences in previous studies remains unclear.

We examined a model of well-being among young individuals that incorporates neighborhood satisfaction, feeling safe at home and feeling safe to walk in the community as indicator of neighborhood safety perception. We hypothesize that feeling safe at home and in the community will have a direct effect on life satisfaction and an indirect effect via neighborhood satisfaction. Participants' age and gender were used as control variables.

## **4 Method**

### **4.1 Participants**

The sample included 827 adolescents, 57.8% were male. Mean age was 12.5 (SD = .69) years old. Data came from 38 urban schools across three different regions in Chile.

### **4.2 Procedure**

Data collection in Chile was based on a self-report survey administered to participants during the regular class period. Data correspond to first national data collection from IscWeb Project in Chile (Dinisman and Ress 2014; Oyanedel et al. 2014). Students provided their assent, and passive consent from parents or guardians was obtained by a school request. Ethical procedures were adopted regarding information confidentiality and informed consent. Active consent was required from both the school principal and the parents' association representatives.

### **4.3 Measures**

#### **4.3.1 Life Satisfaction**

In order to capture the subjective well-being of the participants, the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS) created by Huebner (1991) was adapted to the Chilean context (Alfaro et al. 2016a, 2016b). In particular, using a sample of 1096 adolescents, they translated the scale into Spanish and examined the data using factorial analysis, construct, and convergent validity, finding support for this measure in the Chilean context. The scale contains five items that evaluate life in a general and context-free manner (Huebner 2004), with an omega reliability coefficient of .62 (Raykov and Marcoulides 2011). Some of the affirmations in the scale are: "My life is going well"; "My life is just right"; "I wish I had a different kind of life" (reverse code), "I have a good life", and "I have what I want in life". Each affirmation is responded by scoring in a 5-point scale (0 = strongly disagree; 4 = very much agree). Higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction.

### 4.3.2 Neighborhood Satisfaction

Neighborhood satisfaction was assessed by a latent variable created using three items that involved satisfaction with specific aspects of the community, such as: “The local police in your area”; “The area you live in general”; “The people in your area”. The participants reported their levels of satisfaction using a 11-point scale (0 = completely dissatisfied; 10 = completely satisfied) with an omega reliability coefficient of .76 (Raykov and Marcoulides 2011). Higher values indicate higher levels of satisfaction with the neighborhood.

### 4.3.3 Perceptions of Safety

In order to measure levels of safety perceived by the participants, we used two observed variables: “I feel safe when I walk in the area I live in”; and “I feel safe at home”. The items were based on a 5-point scale (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = very much agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of safety with home and the neighborhood.

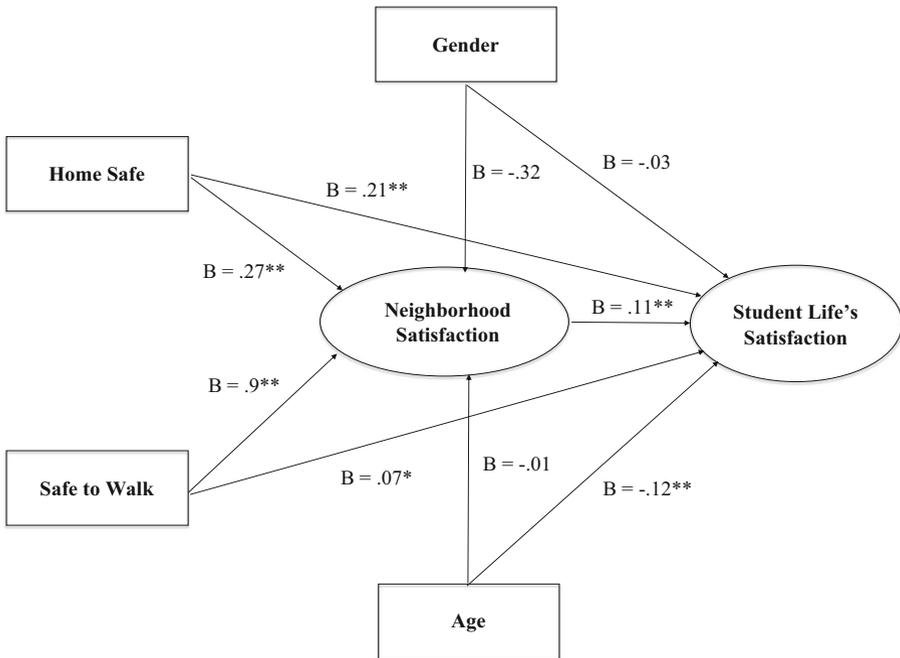
### 4.3.4 Demographic Variables

Two control variables were included in the model: Age and gender. Gender was dummy coded (0 = male; 1 = female), and age was entered as a continuous variable based on students’ self-reported date of birth.

## 4.4 Data Analysis

All variables showed a < 5% of missing values. From the original sample ( $N = 827$ ), 8.7% of cases ( $N = 72$ ) showed at least one missing value in one of the variables assessed. Little’s MCAR test rejected the null hypothesis of missing completely at random,  $\chi^2(33) = 54.435$ ,  $p < .05$ . Therefore, we used Mplus 8.1 to multiple impute missing data based on an unrestricted variance covariance model (H1 model) (Asparouhov and Muthén 2010). Using this approach, we generated 20 multiple imputed datasets that were used for all the analyses reported here.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was conducted to test our conceptual model in Mplus 8.1. The hypothesized model tested neighborhood satisfaction as a mediator variable between feelings of safety at home and in the community, and life satisfaction (Fig. 1). The mediation approach was based on Baron and Kenny’s (1986) approach and requires three conditions: (a) the levels of safety at home and in the community must have a direct effect on satisfaction with the neighborhood (mediator variables), (b) these two variables must have an effect on life satisfaction, and (c) the initial effect of safety at home and community on life satisfaction is no longer significant –or is reduced– once the mediator variable is included. Yet, recent approaches to mediation using SEMs argue the need to test the indirect effect on the basis of 95% confidence intervals of the unstandardized coefficient estimates. In particular, the mediation effect is tested by computing 95% confidence intervals for those indirect effects using a bootstrapping approach. If this confidence interval does not include 0, it is possible to identify a significant indirect effect. Regarding the type of bootstrap method, recent simulation studies suggest the use of confidence intervals based on the



Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

**Fig. 1** Standardized Results from Mediational Model of Neighborhood Satisfaction, Feeling Safe at home and Feeling Safe in the Community and Student Life's Satisfaction. Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

2.5th and 97.5th percentiles from the bootstrap distribution perform better (Muthén et al. 2016). However, Mplus 8.1 does not provide 95% bootstrap confidence intervals on indirect effects when analyzed in multiple imputed datasets. Therefore, we calculated symmetric 95% confidence intervals applying bootstrap standard errors. Accordingly, 50,000 bootstrap samples were generated for each multiple imputed dataset. Then, the models were fitted in each bootstrap dataset. Maximum Likelihood was used as the estimation method. The models were assessed based on chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), comparative fit index (CFI), and estimated root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence interval. As a reference, RMSEA lower values of .05 indicate close approximate fit. CFI and TLI values  $> .90$  reflect reasonably good fit (Byrne 2012; Kline 2011).

## 5 Results

Table 1 summarizes mean values, standard deviation, range, number of respondents, and correlations for each measure assessed in the study.

### 5.1 Measurement Model

Our first analysis examined the fit model for the two latent variables using: Life satisfaction (5 indicators) and neighborhood satisfaction (3 indicators). Data indicated

**Table 1** Descriptive study variables

Descriptive	%	Mean (SD)	Min	Max	<i>n</i>
Age	–	12.5 (.69)	10	14	808
Gender (Female = 1)	42.2%	–	–	–	808
Life Satisfaction	–	2.81 (.59)	0	4	796
Neighborhood Satisfaction	–	6.76 (2.26)	0	10	808
Safe to Walk	–	2.77 (1.34)	0	4	808
Home Safe	–	3.59 (.82)	0	4	808

a good fit model:  $\chi^2 (19) = 28.068$ ,  $p = .082$ ; CFI = .994; TLI = .992; and RMSEA = .024, 90% CI [.000, .042]. Based on these results we continued with the mediational model assessment.

## 5.2 Mediational Model

Results of the mediational model are displayed in Table 2. The model shows good fit to the data:  $\chi^2 (43) = 53.344$ ,  $p = .134$ ; CFI = .994; TLI = .992; and RMSEA = .017, 90% CI [.000, .030]. Results in Table 2 suggest a direct effect of neighborhood satisfaction ( $b = 0.111$ ,  $p < .001$ ), home safe ( $b = 0.216$ ,  $p < .001$ ), safe to walk ( $b = 0.062$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and age ( $b = -0.110$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on life satisfaction. In contrast, gender has no direct effect on life satisfaction. Safe to walk ( $b = 0.892$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and home safety ( $b = 0.285$ ,  $p < .01$ ) had a direct effect on neighborhood satisfaction. Gender and age had no direct effect.

Mediation analysis is shown at the bottom section on Table 2, using a symmetric 95% confidence interval based on bootstrap standard errors. There is a positive indirect effect on life satisfaction from safe to walk ( $b = 0.099$ ) and home safe ( $b = 0.032$ ). Moreover, neighborhood satisfaction, home safety, safe to walk, gender, and age accounted for almost a third (28.9%) of the variance in life satisfaction. Similarly, home safety, safe to walk, gender, and age accounted for 31.8% of the variance in neighborhood satisfaction.

## 6 Discussion

The results of our study support our hypothesis, suggesting a link between perceptions of home/neighborhood safety and life satisfaction through satisfaction with the neighborhood among Chilean adolescents. Our results are in line with previous reports (Coulton and Spilsbury 2014; Lee and Yoo 2015; Sellström and Bremberg 2006) demonstrating a significant relationship between neighborhood satisfaction and life satisfaction. Although the neighborhood is not a proximal context such as family or school, it represents an important contextual variable for youth development. Studies show the living context plays a key role on the psychosocial development of children. However, some topics still remain understudied, for example Freeman (2010) points out to changes in the character and functioning of the neighborhood in which children live and their impact upon children's social worlds (p. 157).

**Table 2** Results for mediation analysis and symmetric 95% confidence intervals for direct, indirect, and total effects based on bootstrap standard errors (N = 827)

Parameter	Estimate	S.E.	Est./S.E.
Dependent variable: Life satisfaction			
Neighborhood Satisfaction	0.111***	0.023	4.864
Safe to Walk	0.062*	0.029	2.162
Home Safe	0.216***	0.041	5.234
Female	-0.029	0.052	-0.546
Age	-0.110*	0.044	-2.494
Dependent variable: Neighborhood satisfaction			
Safe to Walk	0.892***	0.071	12.600
Home Safe	0.285**	0.102	2.793
Female	-0.311	0.167	-1.869
Age	-0.011	0.124	-0.088
95% CI			
	Lower 2.5%	Estimate	Upper 2.5%
Effects from Safe to Walk to Life Satisfaction			
Direct Effect	0.005	0.062 <sup>a</sup>	0.119
Indirect Effect	0.058	0.099	0.140
Total Effect	0.119	0.161	0.205
95% CI			
	Lower 2.5%	Estimate	Upper 2.5%
Effects from Home Safe to Life Satisfaction			
Direct Effect	0.136	0.216 <sup>a</sup>	0.296
Indirect Effect	0.005	0.032	0.059
Total Effect	0.163	0.247	0.331

A model not including the mediator showed direct effects on Life Satisfaction of 0.162 for Safe Walk and 0.248 for Home Safe

\*:  $p < .05$ ; \*\*:  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .001$

Our findings add to the literature confirming that the notion of safety affects not only neighborhood satisfaction but also life satisfaction (González-Carrasco et al. 2018; Sellström and Bremberg 2006), demonstrating the importance of children's perception and evaluation of their surrounding world in order to determine their own life satisfaction. Within this context, Collins' (2001) postulate that children's perception of safety should be considered a mediator of health and well-being, others also suggest the inclusion of the domain of safety along with any measure of subjective well-being (González-Carrasco et al. 2018).

Studies by Eriksson et al. (2011), and Ben-Arieh and Shimoni (2014) have contributed to improve our understanding of the role of safety perceptions both at home and in the community and its relationship with subjective well-being. Our study points in the same direction and confirms that feeling safe at home and in the neighborhood are associated to higher life satisfaction levels,

providing useful insights for future community intervention programs aiming to improve children and adolescents' subjective well-being.

Interestingly, our study found that safety is not only important for life satisfaction but also has an indirect effect via the evaluation of neighborhood satisfaction. This is a key finding of our study and a contribution to the scientific knowledge on this topic, discovering novel association of variables that contribute to explain children and adolescents' indicators of well-being. Further, our study reveals a significant relationship between safety and community satisfaction, recognizes its importance and its nature. Indeed, previous studies in Chile (in the city of Santiago) found that trust, cohesion and positive interactions among community members were related to the perception of safety (Núñez et al. 2012), which can be considered important features of the community on the perception of safety. Future studies should examine this relationship from a rural perspective and compare against the urban context (Newland et al. 2014). Rees et al. (2017) found that Argentinian and Romanian children tend to feel more secure in rural compared to urban areas. The opposite was seen in South Korea. A study by Eriksson et al. (2011) described the association among subjective well-being, community trust, and perceptions of safety over Swedish urban and rural areas in a sample of 3852 children and adolescents aged 11 to 15. Another key finding of this study was that community trust and perceptions of safety were associated to subjective well-being, also those living in rural areas expressed higher levels of community trust and safety compared to those in cities. Even though we did not examine a rural sample, the relationship of safety with other neighborhood features and well-being could be further explored by considering the rural versus urban context.

### 6.1 Limitations of the Current Study

Our study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, the neighborhood influence can affect children and adolescents at different stages of their life, unfortunately this cannot be assessed in cross-sectional studies, however we included age of participants as a control variable in our model seeking to compensate for this effect. Secondly, our analyses were limited to data obtained from urban community contexts, meaning a particular cultural context for communities and safety. Future studies should incorporate rural areas, international data or other socio-cultural contexts in order to compare our results. Third, we used data from different schools and individual neighborhood perceptions. However, we did not apply multilevel analysis for communities, this was due to sample restriction and a small sample size. Moreover, our analyses did not include school safety measures. In many cases, Chilean students attend to schools that are not located on the same community they live in. Derived from this, we did not make distinctions for neighborhood, communities or the areas where children live. Future studies should include larger datasets incorporating more communities in order to overcome this limitation. Another limitation is the use of measures based on single or few items, and a lower internal consistency for one of them. This could indeed limit our understanding of these constructs and therefore must be considered with

caution when generalizing the extent of our results. Still, our structural model demonstrated a good fit, and different significant paths that would support our hypothesis.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, our study provides some relevant findings: They confirm the importance of feeling safe at home and in the community for adolescents' well-being, beyond age or gender. Also, satisfaction with the community seems to operate as a mediator variable that contributes to explain this effect. Lastly, these our results add to the existing literature from a South American cultural context, providing valuable insights in order to understand adolescents' well-being.

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