Urban hassles and navigating education: Perceptions of urban high schoolers from a school-wide needs assessment

Abstract

A wealth of scholarly research examines the impact of school environments and climates on students, but far less attention is paid to how the school environment's positioning within its larger community influences student experiences. While there is an understanding that outside environment influences what happens within the school, little study has been done to examine this from a student perspective. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the perceptions of urban high school students influence their navigation of the school environment, sense of empowerment, and future thinking. This study uses a dataset developed from a school-wide needs assessment conducted at an urban Midwestern high school. Findings include students from higher hassle environments perceived the school environment and their futures lower than their low-hassle experiencing peers. Study results posit schools may increasingly need to consider the impact of the proximal external environment when developing and implementing various policies and interventions to improve student outcomes in schools.

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Students living in urban settings often face unique environmental challenges, called urban hassles, due to a variety of stressors related to living in an urban area such as poverty and exposure to violence (Miller & Bennett, 2016). Exposure to these social and environmental factors can lead to social, emotional, and academic challenges, particularly in the acquisition of life long coping strategies (Miller and Bennett, 2016). Studies indicate the constant exposure to stressors within the urban environment can lead to numerous psychosocial issues (Schmitz, et al., 2021). But the result of these stressors may be much more nuanced. Kloep, et al., 2010 indicate that general risk or protective factors may not solely influence one's trajectory in life; however, it is the interaction between various risk and protective factors, such as ones potentially found in urban or school environments, that can determine the perception of a given youth's future self (Kloep, et al., 2010).

School climate, environment, or culture is an important concept in scholarly literature (Cohen, et al., 2009), with increasing attention paid to it over the past three decades (Thapa, et al., 2013). The U.S. Department of Education has furthered this focus through funding programs measuring and examining school climate and environment (Barksdale, Peters, and Corrales, 2019). Naturally, much of the focus on the literature of school environment centers on what happens within the school: classroom interactions, safety, and instruction (Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014; Cohen 2021; Silseth, Hontvedt, Mäkitalo, 2022). However, the outside environment a given student navigates can influence what happens within the school.

The literature also highlights the influence of environmental settings on school climate, culture, and student success (Berkowitz, et al., 2017; Ellis, et al., 2022). The school climate may

influence student success (Cohen, et al., 2009; Cohen, 2021) and school culture of urban areas may present unique concerns for students, parents, and educators. A school's ability to foster safety within their school community influences climate; urban settings produce more concerns regarding crime and quality of education in these areas (Ellis, et al., 2022). While the topic of school climate has been studied numerous times in the literature, students' perceptions of the school environment with regard to their outside environment is understudied. Specifically, there is little examination of how urban hassles, the unique and inherent stressors urban adolescents face in their daily lives, influence the process of going to school. It stands to reason that urban students who face large amounts of specific environmental stressors may face unique challenges in their academic pursuit.

Few studies have examined urban hassles from the student perspective and their impact on navigation of daily life. Youth understand that their environment is not just scenery in which their lives occur, but filled with stressors, interactions with others, and experiences that influence how they view themselves and the world around them (Prince, 2014). Further, fewer studies examine the role of these daily hassles within the context of students' perceptions of their goals, empowerment, and views of the future. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine how perceptions of urban hassles influence navigating components of perceived supportive school environment, empowerment, and future thinking for urban high school students.

Literature Review

The composition of the school is a direct reflection of the neighborhood in which the school is located as students attend schools close in proximity to their residence (Wodtke & Parbst, 2017). Students residing in urban neighborhoods, with high amounts of urban hassles, are surrounded by students with similar environmental characteristics. Urban areas place students at

a greater risk of negative social and developmental outcomes (McCoy & Bowen, 2015) including the increased exposure to stress which can impact coping mechanisms (Miller & Bennett, 2016). Research also indicates the prevalence of mental health disorders in adolescents who reside in urban areas due to the stressors of poverty (Haddad, et al., 2017) Increased exposure to chronic stressors intertwined with the inability to adapt healthy coping mechanism can aid in the presence of aggression, anxiety, and depression within youth (Miller & Bennett, 2016).

Notions of empowerment, future-based thoughts, and perceptions of goals can be important to students across all levels of education. Students residing in areas with high urban hassles are faced with chronic stress due to environmental factors. Research indicates youth residing in urban areas tend to place focus on neighborhood variables and violence which causes stress (Chandra & Batada, 2006). Stress within youth has the ability to impact coping mechanisms challenging their ability to handle the expectations of school and everyday demands of life (Chandra & Batada, 2006). Students' feelings of empowerment, future-based thoughts, and positive interactions within the school setting are impacted by environmental stressors which impact their ability to cope with everyday life demands. Of which, urban youth are subject to social and environmental stressors that can negatively impact their social and developmental trajectories (Miller & Bennett, 2016).

Conceptualizations of the urban environment in school literature are progressing (Englert, 1993; Milner et al., 2015; Welsh & Swain, 2020). Researchers are increasingly including factors such as demographics, inequality, resources, and community contexts (Welsh & Swain, 2020) to gain perspective of how students in urban environments are impacted and can be supported. These expanded views of the urban environment include how experiences outside of school matters (Milner et al., 2015). The literature notes experiences like poverty, violence, residential

discrimination, and racism (Welsh & Swain, 2020), which are all factors situated in urban settings, have been associated with students facing greater challenges to achieving goals academically, behaviorally, and socially (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Given the unique characteristics and diverse challenges that coexist in urban environments, scholars (Harley, 2015) have reconceptualized ways in which youth can be supported.

For example, Harley's (2015) study on hope among urban African American youth found that goal attainment could be achieved through various aspects of hope, such as spirituality and taking on a "gonna-make-it" mentality. These studies provide evidence that despite ongoing hassles of urban living existing both inside and outside of school, scholars are reevaluating ways in which education in urban environments can be enhanced. Indeed, these studies along with a growing body of research suggests literature has yet to uncover the perceptions of youth who experience urban hassles first-hand and how these perceptions may be shaping student experiences of school.

Hassles are considered to be experiences of daily living that are deemed to be harmful or threatening to an individual (Miller & Townsend, 2005). The Urban Hassle Index (UHI) is a scale that measures the social and environmental stressors, also considered, urban hassles, specific to youth residing in urban environments (Min., et al., 2018). UHI measures the social and community aspects specific to urban environments to increase understanding of urban youth's exposure to chronic stressors (Miller & Bennett, 2016).

Overall health and well-being are impacted by mental health disorders negatively impacting academic outcomes for students (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020). With the understanding that youth formulate coping mechanisms to manage stress, the Urban Hassles Index seeks to understand how the exposure to certain environmental factors contributes to

stress. The Urban Hassles Index is critical for understanding the environmental factors that youth experience in their everyday reality (Min, et al., 2018). Chronic exposure to social and environmental factors can increase mental health concerns (aggression, anxiety, and depression), decrease academic achievement, and can create maladaptive coping mechanism (Miller & Bennet, 2016).

It is possible that these maladaptive coping mechanisms developed from residing in a high hassle area can lead to struggles within the school environment. Kirk et al., (2017) indicate that if students lack the capability to control outcomes within their educational journey, they will perceive themselves as disempowered. Empowerment can be associated with improved critical thinking, which allows students to appropriately critique and influence (and potentially change) the environments around them (Horn, 2017). Furthermore, Horn, 2017 indicates empowerment felt in educational settings translates to academics and outcomes beyond the school. Pearrow and Pollack (2009) indicate empowerment is continuum, with one end being personal (e.g. coping strategies) and the other end focusing more on communities, groups, and families. Within an academic setting, it is possible that the strategies or mechanisms developed outside the school influence how a student navigates their school environment.

This study is guided by several research questions. First, and more general, how do perceptions of urban hassles influence navigating components of perceived student empowerment for urban high schoolers? Next, do urban high school students reporting higher levels of experiencing perceived urban hassles exhibit lower perceived student empowerment?

Methods

Dataset

The dataset analyzed in this study was developed from a routine needs assessment conducted by an urban, Midwestern high school. The school's school social worker spearheaded the effort and followed the rules and regulations required by the school to conduct a needs assessment survey. The research team was contacted to suggest some measures for the school to use, but was not involved in any data collection nor made any final decisions on what measures were selected for the needs assessment. The final dataset, developed from this needs assessment survey, included 256 total fields including demographic information, a hope scale, a measure on urban hassles, and several questions about the students' perceptions on the school environment. No identifying information, such as names or school identification number, was collected or asked.

The school uploaded the survey into SurveyMonkey for administration. The needs assessment was conducted during a school-wide study hall on school-issued iPads during the 2014-2015 school year, again as part of normal school operations. Every student was asked to take the survey and those absent were given the survey in the same manner on their first day back. A de-identified dataset was provided to the research team for analysis. IRB and school approval was obtained for the research team to analyze the dataset.

Measures

Urban Hassles

The Urban Hassles Indeix (UHI) is a 22-item scale that measures the perceptions of the struggles and hassles adolescents face in urban environments. These include being asked about drugs, hearing gunshots or sirens at night, taking longer ways to places, and being unable to hang out with friends because of transportation issues. Several studies have indicated the psychometric strength of the UHI (Miller & Bennet, 2016). The scale uses two different Likert-type response

options, one for frequency of experiencing a hassle and one for magnitude of the issue in one's living situation.

Hope

This dataset included the Urban Adolescent Hope Scale (UAHS) to assess perceptions of hope. This is a 24-item scale that assesses hope in five subdomains: Spirituality, Personal Agency, The Basics, Caring Connections, and Education. Mean scores were calculated because each the number of items within each domain were uneven. This standardized the scores to range between 1 and 5, with higher scores indicated higher levels of hope within the domain. Initial psychometric testing indicated high levels of factorial validity and reliability (Canfield, et al., 2018).

Perceptions of the School

Several survey questions were used to assess the perceptions of the school environment, interactions within the school, and other school-related factors. Each item was on the same stem and leaf structure, beginning with, how much do you agree with the following statement. Examples of items include, whether the students feels they will graduate, they are prepared for their future, they feel safe, and perceptions of school faculty and administration. The same five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the item.

Results

Demographics

Table 1 provides demographic findings for the dataset. In terms of gender identity, cases were relatively evenly split, with those identifying as female having a slight majority (52.9%). The average age for cases in this dataset was 16.1 (SD=1.373). Those in 11^{th} grade (juniors) were

the largest group (31.3%), followed by freshman (9th grade; 26.3%), sophomores (10th grade; 21.2), and finally seniors (12th grade; 20.9%). The school chose to leave race and ethnicity as an open response option. This elicited responses ranging from typical answers regarding race and ethnicity (e.g. Black/African American, Caucasian, etc.), but because of the open response, some wrote racial slurs, some left it blank, and others wrote other responses such, "why do you want to know?" Therefore, we present race ethnicity as those who identified as a Non-Minority (69.4%) and Minority (21.1%).

Correlation

After examining each variable for normalcy, we conducted a Pearson's correlation for the 16 items regarding navigating the school and each urban hassle individually. Table 2 provides the results. The vast majority of coefficients were statistically insignificant ($p>.05$). Of the few statistically significant coefficients, the relationships between feel supported academically by teachers (-.216), feeling prepared for the future if one applies themselves (-.205), and being asked for money by drug addicts was the strongest. No other coefficient between each individual urban hassle and the 16 items were above the absolute value of .2.

Cluster Analysis

The Urban Hassles Index (UHI) has had multiple iterations in the literature, each with different factor structures. With this potential discrepancy in how to use the scale to develop either a global score or a score for a specific domain, we decided to examine the perceived experience of hassles overall. Our goal was to identify groupings of students based on their perceptions of hassles overall. Therefore, we ran several k-means cluster analyses to gather groupings of students as they perceive the urban hassles overall. After several iterations, we decided a two-cluster solution had the tightest groupings (see Figure 1) of cases. One group had

consistently higher centers for each of the urban hassles and was considered the High Hassles group. The other cluster had clusters centers that were lower for each individual hassle, the Low Hassles cluster. Thus, we had two groups for analysis, one who experienced high hassles overall and a perceived lower hassles cluster.

Mean Differences

Table 3 presents the results of independent samples t-tests conducted between the 16 school items and clusters of cases. The perceptions across each of the 16 school items were statistically significantly ($p<.05$) lower for those in the High Hassles Group compared to the Low Hassles group. Differences in scores (High Hassles minus Low Hassles) ranged from -.357 to -.69. The perception of being prepared if one applies themselves had the highest difference (-.69), followed by perceptions of feeling grades reflect effort (-.648), and Educational Hope (-.607). Thus, examining hassles globally indicates much lower scoring for those with higher perceptions of hassles in their daily lives.

Discussion

Limitations

These findings must be interpreted with caution given several limiting factors to this study. First, the data used in this study was developed by a school for school purposes, not research explicitly. This potentially creates issues around fidelity of responses. For example, gender and race and ethnicity were left by the school as open-ended questions, which yielded responses ranging from racial slurs, rhetorical questions (e.g. “why do you want to know?”), to being left blank. Thus, these could not be included in the analysis. Along those lines, no actual observations of the school, students, or outside environment were made. This study solely relies on the perceptions of students. Next, the data comes from a single high school in the Midwest, it

is possible that students in other locales may perceive their environment differently. While the research team was contacted for suggestions of items and scales, the school ultimately made the final choice of what to include in their routine needs assessment. Thus, while valid instruments exist for climate, empowerment, etc., they were not utilized in this study.

Implications

These findings indicate a challenge that many school social workers, counselors, and other related services personnel face. Many interventions and policies take place within the school. However, these findings indicate that perceptions of the outside environment do play a role in how students navigate the school and their academic pursuits. This supports Kloep et al. (2010) assertion that students, or at least their perceptions, reflect the environment in which they reside. And while we understand school does not take place within a vacuum, these findings potentially indicate aspects of school-based practice must find ways to address outside environmental factors.

The perceptions of relationships with school faculty and staff are also influenced by the outside environment. Students who perceive their environment as one of a large amount of hassles perceive their school as less supportive. Therefore, interventions on supportive school environments must take this into account. And while we want to remain cautious of the strength in our statements given the limitations of this study, but the findings may give us pause in how we theoretically construct interventions within the school. For example, in a three-tier intervention system, a fourth tier may need to be considered: the outside environment. And while school social workers, counselors, and other related services personnel may be limited in direct interventions within the community, the effect the community plays within the school must be considered.

Alternatively, if we maintain a three-tiered structure, individual and environmental factors could be integrated into the existing tiers to support the needs of students in urban locales. Rather than adding a fourth tier, our findings that urban hassles are associated with perceptions of aspects of school environment, future self, and empowerment, could be basis for further integrating the outside environment within a current three-tier structure. For example, stressors related to extreme poverty or violence to crime may be able to be acknowledged and addressed within the Tier I and II levels. A practitioner addressing factors of neighborhood crime may take on a more conscious awareness perspective of the students circumstance which impact student and staff interaction.

This study conducted a cluster analysis as a result of varying interpretations of the UHI's factor structure. While there are limitations to cluster analysis and a more overarching view of hassles may be obtained utilizing factors rather than individual items, the cluster analysis did yield opportunity to examine the environment in general and overall. Future study should take into account both aspects of the environment. The dataset for study was done as part of a routine needs assessment, and the overarching findings from this study provide opportunities to then take a more nuanced and detailed examination of urban hassles and their influence within the school. Further study is needed to examine how specific hassles or hassle domains can influence perceptions of how students navigate both the school environment but the outside one as well.

These findings indicate there is a relationship between the outside environment and actions taken within a school. In particular, students who perceive a high hassle environment have lower perceptions of their interactions with teachers and administrators. But could it be that when additional outcomes, beyond this study, from teacher and administrator interactions with students are included, we find that the outside environment is instead a mediator? While this

study supports commentary on how the outside environment influences what happens within the school, further analysis is needed to examine the larger relationship between teacher and administrator actions, the environment, and student outcomes. It could be that the larger influence of a school is mediated by the environment in which its students navigate.

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Table 1. Participant Demographics (N=297)

	M	SD
Age	16.1	1.373
Gender	N	%
Male	140	47.1
Female	157	52.9
Race/Ethnicity	N	%
Non-Minority	206	69.4
Minority	55	21.1
Grade	N	%
9	78	26.3
10	63	21.2
11	93	31.3
12	62	20.9

Table 2. Correlations between Urban Hassles and School-based Perceptions (n=215)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Asked for money by drug addicts	-.136*	-.193*	-.153*	-.019	-.079	-.154*	-.08	-.033
Taken a longer way to school or work to avoid trouble.	-.046	-.024	-.024	-.005	.056	-.026	.061	.051
Pressured to join a gang.	-.11	-.146*	-.119	-.034	-.024	-.084	.018	-.062
Made fun of because of getting good grades	-.076	-.091	-.04	-.004	.011	-.014	.026	.076
Worried that someone will try to steal your clothes, shoes, or money.	-.052	-.063	-.093	-.093	-.078	-.07	-.022	-.06
Pressured for sex by boyfriend/girlfriend.	-.076	-.105	-.103	-.032	-.021	-.011	.06	.064
Worked to help pay bills at home	-.067	-.09	.02	.01	.032	-.006	-.037	.023
Heard gunshots at night.	-.059	-.1	-.095	-.078	-.058	-.045	-.007	-.027
Heard sirens at night.	.136*	.11	.083	-.035	-.028	.114	.096	.146*
Worried about the safety of friends.	-.044	-.034	-.006	-.038	-.076	.04	-.002	.042
Worried about safety of family members.	-.009	-.002	.024	-.012	-.022	.032	.013	.054
Not told your friends that you worry about being safe.	-.053	-.098	.023	-.071	-.062	-.005	.016	.017
Been stopped and questioned by police.	-.011	-.071	-.011	-.004	.053	.029	.044	.014
Asked to sell drugs.	-.083	-.097	-.081	-.044	.008	-.029	.004	-.034
Asked to hide or carry drugs.	-.07	-.09	-.117	-.037	-.001	-.046	.022	-.054
Been followed in department stores by salespeople.	-.073	-.104	-.075	.002	.027	-.033	.058	-.063
Not been able to go into convenience stores (7-11, Dairy Mart) with friends because of rule limiting more than 2 students/teens at a time in the store.	-.076	-.108	-.073	.038	-.03	-.085	.019	-.068
Been unable to go to parties or games with friends due to transportation problems.	-.025	-.065	-.019	-.067	-.084	-.042	.029	-.037
Teased about the clothes you wear.	-.1	-.13	-.046	-.026	-.008	-.044	.029	.015
Walked past abandoned buildings and lots.	.07	.077	-.032	-.073	-.06	.065	.055	.129
Pressured by friends to fight.	-.08	-.138*	-.089	-.051	-.034	-.066	.038	-.086
Made fun of because of getting bad grades.	-.115	-.155*	-.064	.033	.025	-.038	.008	-.045

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed). 1= I am looking forward to my future., 2= I am preparing for my future.3= The principal of my school is someone I can go to if I need help with something 4=I feel safe at school.5=If I see a better or different way of doing something at school, I can tell teachers or staff at my school and they will take my ideas into consideration.6=I have at least one teacher in my school who I can talk to about school or non-school issues.7=When I do well on my school work or participate at school, my teachers recognize it and let me know that I did well.8=My grades and test scores show the effort I put into school work.

Table 2. Correlations between Urban Hassles and School-based Perceptions (n=215) Continued

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Asked for money by drug addicts	-.216*	-.160*	-.205*	-.077	-.12	-.11	-.116	-.093
Taken a longer way to school or work to avoid trouble.	-.035	.052	.002	.004	.001	-.084	-.036	.023
Pressured to join a gang.	-.103	-.102	-.13	-.03	-.072	-.029	-.119	-.061
Made fun of because of getting good grades	-.018	-.034	-.077	.034	-.048	-.086	-.022	-.059
Worried that someone will try to steal your clothes, shoes, or money.	-.107	-.079	-.086	.075	.047	-.152*	-.024	-.035
Pressured for sex by boyfriend/girlfriend.	-.073	-.015	-.111	-.041	-.038	.029	-.058	.022
Worked to help pay bills at home	-.079	-.019	-.044	.02	.012	-.035	.009	-.003
Heard gunshots at night.	-.1	-.054	-.066	-.01	-.045	-.109	-.082	-.027
Heard sirens at night.	-.007	.063	.115	.137*	.098	-.173*	.059	.002
Worried about the safety of friends.	-.057	.049	.03	.082	.003	-.170*	-.013	-.032
Worried about safety of family members.	-.042	.05	.032	.095	.026	-.158*	.039	-.009
Not told your friends that you worry about being safe.	-.126	-.032	-.086	.027	-.012	-.188*	-.059	-.081
Been stopped and questioned by police.	-.037	-.008	-.042	.038	.024	-.136*	-.062	-.025
Asked to sell drugs.	-.087	-.051	-.109	-.002	.018	-.051	-.099	-.038
Asked to hide or carry drugs.	-.109	-.071	-.135*	-.003	-.006	-.052	-.112	-.045
Been followed in department stores by salespeople.	-.115	-.042	-.034	.051	-.013	-.013	-.088	-.033
Not been able to go into convenience stores (7-11, Dairy Mart) with friends because of rule limiting more than 2 students/teens at a time in the store.	-.032	-.033	.003	.029	.016	-.058	-.054	.02
Been unable to go to parties or games with friends due to transportation problems.	-.117	-.046	0	.104	.06	-.054	.004	.018
Teased about the clothes you wear.	-.09	-.003	-.11	-.013	-.06	-.104	-.133	-.068
Walked past abandoned buildings and lots.	-.091	.071	.081	.058	.062	-.173*	.042	-.009
Pressured by friends to fight.	-.136*	-.078	-.093	.019	-.024	-.028	-.116	-.056
Made fun of because of getting bad grades.	-.074	.025	-.078	-.004	-.054	-.02	-.082	-.009

* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed). 9=I feel supported academically by my teachers. 10=I feel that my school is preparing me for my future. 11=I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself. 12=Hope Spirituality Mean Score 13= Hope Personal Agency Mean Score 14=Hope The Basics Mean Score 15=Hope Education Mean Score 16=Hope Caring Connections Mean Score

Table 3. Mean Differences

	High Hassles		Low Hassles				
	M	SD	M	SD	Δ (High-Low)	t	df
I plan on furthering my education after I graduate high school	3.74	1.206	4.33	.973	-.581	3.042	63.258
I will graduate high school.	4.2	1.128	4.6	.815	-.407	2.29	58.231
I am looking forward to my future.	3.66	1.203	4.25	1.058	-.592	3.296	216
I am preparing for my future.	3.59	1.222	4.18	.992	-.594	3.426	215
The principal of my school is someone I can go to if I need help with something.	2.74	1.17	3.22	1.237	-.476	2.366	217
I feel safe at school.	2.89	1.22	3.27	1.236	-.375	1.849	216
If I see a better or different way of doing something at school, I can tell teachers or staff at my school and they will take my ideas into consideration.	2.87	1.108	3.23	1.165	-.357	1.866	216
I have at least one teacher in my school who I can talk to about school or non-school issues.	3.26	1.188	3.73	1.243	-.471	2.326	217
When I do well on my school work or participate at school, my teachers recognize it and let me know that I did well.	3.13	1.115	3.61	1.051	-.483	2.754	217
My grades and test scores show the effort I put into school work.	3.11	1.238	3.75	1.105	-.648	3.467	216
I feel supported academically by my teachers.	2.98	.882	3.51	.999	-.528	3.497	79.12
I feel that my school is preparing me for my future.	3	1.066	3.53	1.129	-.533	2.941	72.504
I will be prepared for the future if I apply myself.	3.3	1.093	3.99	1.012	-.69	4.032	214
Hope: Spirituality Mean Score	3.24	1.148	3.68	1.213	-.438	2.216	216
Hope: Personal Agency Mean Score	3.54	.94	4.01	.907	-.463	3.073	216
Hope: The Basics Mean Score	3.14	.882	3.52	1.049	-.382	2.523	85.253
Hope: Education Mean Score	3.43	.965	4.04	.993	-.607	3.735	216
Hope: Caring Connections Mean Score	3.44	.915	3.88	.98	-.436	2.739	216

Note: All differences are statistically significant ($p<.05$)

Figure 1. Cluster Analysis