

# **Bullying in Our Nation's Schools: Where Do We Go From Here?**

by

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## **The Problem**

**Bullying is a widespread social problem affecting young people in our schools. Approximately one in five elementary school students and one in ten middle school students in the United States are bullied regularly. Estimates suggest that 1.6 million students are bullied at least once a week. Bullying causes victims psychosocial harm and seriously impairs the mission of our schools.**

Bullying is characterized by repeated aggressive behaviors that are intended to cause distress or harm another's person, property, reputation or social acceptance. Bullying involves an imbalance of social power or physical strength between aggressor and victim. Bullying behaviors generally occur in three distinct forms:

- 1) *Direct physical bullying* includes assault to one's person or damage to one's property.
- 2) *Direct verbal bullying* includes name calling and teasing.
- 3) *Indirect verbal bullying*, the most difficult to identify, includes actions such as spreading rumors, encouraging others to exclude one, or damaging one's reputation.

Regardless of the form bullying takes, victimization is typically associated with a young person's ethnicity, physical differences, resistance to conform to pressure from peers, high achievement, being new to the school, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background. Distinguishing bullying from normal childhood behaviors is an imperative but complicated task, as many children and adults normalize aggressive behaviors among children as being both expected and accepted. Occasional teasing is often playful and does not constitute bullying, as it is not concerted, collective and repetitive. Bullying, on the other hand, is not normal and should not be tolerated.

## **The Research Evidence**

**Determining the prevalence of bullying in the United States is problematic because estimates rely largely on self-reports from victims. Current data likely do not accurately reflect the actual amount of bullying occurring within the general student population.**

The actual prevalence of bullying in our schools is likely to be higher than the estimates generated from our data sources. Like other types of victims, those who experience bullying may not report their experiences to adults because they perceive more risk than benefit from telling or because they hold low expectations for adult interventions. Furthermore, some victims may not report their experiences, either to adults or on surveys, because they have normalized such behaviors and have not defined them as instances of bullying. Nevertheless, current reports suggest the following trends:

- Approximately 30 percent of school children within a given semester in the United States, or roughly 5.7 million students, are involved in bullying incidents as either a bully or a victim.

- Children from families with low socioeconomic status, divorce or separation, harsh home environments, or child abuse may be at higher risk for both bullying and victimization.
- Bullying and victimization are not exclusive categories, but rather, they form a continuum of experience such that many students are both victim and bully.
- Studies of sex differences find that boys most often engage in direct bullying, whereas girls more often engage in indirect methods.
- Longitudinal studies following children's movement from elementary school to college link one's experiences as either a bully or victim early in one's school experience with future experience as either a bully or victim later in one's school experience.
- Empirical studies indicate that direct physical bullying increases as students progress through elementary school, peaks in middle school, and declines throughout high school. Direct verbal bullying, on the other hand, remains constant.
- Recent studies indicate that 88 percent of junior high and high school students have witnessed bullying in their schools. While they do not initiate the bullying event, bystanders are an important part of the bullying situation because bullies often derive power from the public display, and the inaction of bystanders makes victims feel isolated and rejected.
- Bullying is often cloaked in fear and secrecy, so it remains unknown to parents, teachers, and other adults.

### **Gender and Sexuality Related Bullying**

Social scientists have identified gender and sexuality related bullying as a serious social problem. Research indicates that the most common insults used while bullying are about a peer's perceived sexual orientation. Many conceptualize this form of bullying as a juvenile hate crime. In recent years, concern for the well being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (GLBTQ) students has prompted policymakers to pass legislation prohibiting discrimination in public schools on the basis of sexual orientation. In 1999 the U.S. Department of Education incorporated sexual orientation into a comprehensive guide for school districts on protecting students from harassment. Despite these initiatives, studies clearly indicate that the fear of verbal and physical harassment continues to impact the lives of GLBTQ students:

- A national study finds that 24 percent of GLBTQ students under the age of 18 have been physically attacked by peers, 44 percent have been verbally attacked by peers, and 40 percent of these attacks have taken place in schools.
- A recent study of 300 schools finds that 82 percent of schools are aware of homophobic bullying and 26 percent are aware of homophobic violence.
- A recent survey of GLBTQ students finds that 90 percent of students report that their schools do not discuss sexuality in a positive light, and 80 percent of homophobic incidents at their schools have been ignored or received only a light reprimand.
- GLBTQ students are three times more likely than non-GLBTQ students to say they do not feel safe at school.
- The National Education Association finds that many parents consider speculation and taunting associated with peers' sexual orientation so common among children that they neglect to talk to their own children about the harm associated with it.

Taken together, the empirical research indicates that youth who are sexual minorities are the most powerless students when it comes to stopping bullying because they often do not get support from peers or teachers.

## **Cyber-bullying**

With technological advancements in communications (e.g., mobile phones, text messaging, chatrooms, blogs, etc.) and the proliferation of social networking communities (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.), cyber-bullying has emerged as a recent social problem. Cyber-bullying occurs when an individual is harassed, humiliated or threatened by a peer using technology. The physical and emotional distance between bully and victim provided by virtual interactions facilitates bullying because individuals feel invisible, anonymous and less responsible for virtual actions.

- A recent survey of middle school children finds that 65 percent of students between the ages of 8 and 14 years have been either directly or indirectly involved in a cyber-bullying incident as bully, victim, or bystander.
- A national study finds that 35 percent of youths have been threatened online.
- Recent studies indicate that cyber-bullying is a common way of retaliating for victims of other forms of bullying.
- Empirical research concludes that 58 percent of youth have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that has happened to them online.

Cyber-bullying is a complicated issue for school authorities to address because it often extends outside of the classroom. Moreover, it raises unique issues of school liability because students often use school technology to engage in the behavior, and when confronted, bullies often invoke the right to free speech to legitimize their behavior.

## **The Known Consequences of Bullying**

Exposure to bullying of any type leads to negative consequences for victims, bystanders and schools.

**Victims.** Exposure to bullying may lead the victim to experience somatic symptoms such as sleep difficulties, bed-wetting, headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue. In addition, bullying may seriously impair the victim's psychosocial well-being, leading to increased rates of depression, feelings of isolation, anxiety disorders, and at the extreme, suicidal ideation. Individuals may suffer from the consequences long after the bullying has ceased.

**Bystanders.** Research indicates that bystanders may be present in as much as 85 percent of bullying incidents, yet only a minority of peers offer to help the victim. Those who witness an incident but do nothing may feel guilt. To cope with this guilt, students often justify the situation and their inaction by blaming the victim. Consequently, research indicates that a majority of peers feel that bullying victims are at least partly to blame for bullying, and in fact, they claim bullying may be a useful tool for teaching others appropriate behaviors.

**Schools.** The presence of bullying seriously impairs the mission of our schools. Being bullied negatively influences a student's ability to learn, his/her sense of belonging in school, his/her academic performance, and his/her educational aspirations. Students at schools with negative environments (i.e., lack of supportive administration, lack of policy and protocol regarding bullying) and who experience harassment or bullying have lower academic success than students who do not have these experiences. The fear of being bullied leads students to avoid public areas such as the cafeteria and restrooms, and approximately 160,000 students stay home each day to avoid bullies. Students who are bullied are more likely to drop out of school or display disruptive behaviors while at school than those who are not. More importantly, students who are bullied are more likely to engage in self-endangering and risky behaviors such as drug abuse, retaliation, or carrying weapons to school.

### **Policy Recommendations and Solutions**

Only in recent years has bullying garnered serious public attention. Bullying became a central issue for school personnel, the general public, and policymakers once it was linked to 71 percent of the school shootings that occurred between 1974 and 2000. Despite repeated attempts to pass federal legislation regarding bullying in our schools, legislators have been unsuccessful. Efforts to curb bullying in our nation's schools remain primarily at the state and local levels. Fifteen states have passed laws addressing bullying within schools, and several others are considering similar legislation. Definitions of what constitutes bullying, however, vary from state to state.

#### ***Where do we go from here?***

Recent reports assessing general and localized intervention strategies from countries around the globe offer three principles to guide our continued efforts at reducing bullying in our schools:

- 1) Intervention is better than no intervention. Across experiments, rates of bullying are consistently higher in control groups than in treatment groups.
- 2) Interventions tend to be more successful when they are implemented in the early years of schooling rather than when added in the later school years.
- 3) The level of school commitment and staff involvement in the intervention is directly related to the success of the intervention. School officials and staff must show explicit commitment to and involvement in the anti-bullying agenda to achieve a significant reduction in bullying behaviors.

While we are beginning to build our knowledge, write policy and implement intervention agendas, substantial needs remain at the national, school, classroom and individual levels to effectively deal with this important issue.

Lawmakers should:

- Implement federal legislation identifying bullying as a national social problem, defining which behaviors constitute bullying, and obligating individual schools and teachers to enforce this policy.

- Allocate funds to ensure that individual schools can provide the necessary professional development for staff, programming for students, and community outreach to combat bullying in our schools.
- Provide incentives for schools to self-evaluate their success in reducing bullying and to proactively develop innovative intervention strategies.

School administrators should:

- Foster the sense of a caring majority and appreciation for diversity through both official policy and everyday practice.
- Establish clear policies defining bullying and outlining sanctions for those who engage in or fail to report bullying incidents.
- Design clear complaint and disciplinary protocols regarding bullying incidents.
- Disseminate policy information annually to parents, students, and staff.
- Develop curriculum, programming, and professional development aimed at educating students and staff about how to effectively reduce bullying in schools.
- Utilize social surveys to assess the incidence of and social climate toward bullying in their institution, as this needs assessment will direct professional development, programming, and community outreach efforts.

Classrooms should:

- Establish clear rules against bullying and identify the mechanisms for filing complaints that are consistent with institutional policy.
- Establish clear rules regarding the appropriate use of technology.

Individual educators should:

- Engage in serious talks about diversity and bullying with students as part of curriculum and informal discussions.
- Uphold a zero-tolerance approach to bullying by intervening during incidents of bullying, reporting the incident to administrators, providing support to victims, and encouraging others to intervene.
- Build strong collaborative relationships with parents through regular meetings.

## **Key Resources**

D'Augelli, A. 1998. *Developmental Implications of Victimization of Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-Sexual Youths*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Horowitz, J., J. Vessey, K. Carlson, J. Bradley, C. Montoya, B. McCullough and J. David. 2004. "Teasing and Bullying Experiences of Middle School Students." *Journal of American Psychiatric Nurses Association* 10:165-172.

Nansel, T.R., M. Overpeck, R.S. Pilla, W.J. Ruan, B. Simons-Morton, and P. Scheidt. 2001. "Bullying Behaviors Among U.S. Youth: Prevalence and Association of Psychosocial Adjustment." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 285(16): 2094-2100.

Olweus, D. 1993. *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

Olweus, D., S. Limber and S. Mihalic. 1999. *The Bullying Prevention Program*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence.

Vossekuil, B., M. Reddy, R. Fein, R. Borum and W. Modzelewski. 2000. *USSS Safe School Initiative: An Interim Report on the Prevention of Targeted Violence in Schools*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.

### **Online Resources**

<http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/>

<http://www.schoolsecurity.org/>

<http://www.bullyonline.org/>

<http://www.bullypolice.org/>

<http://www.popcenter.org/problems/problem-bullying.htm>

### **About the Author**

Daniel G. Renfrow is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Pacific Lutheran University. He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Washington (2005). His current research examines the emergence of gender and sexuality related inequalities in small group interactions. He regularly teaches courses on men and masculinities, gender and sexuality, and social stratification, and he is actively involved with the PLU Women's Center and Men Against Violence group. In 2008 he will join the faculty of Wells College in Aurora, New York.