



ELSEVIER

 JOURNAL OF
**ADOLESCENT
 HEALTH**

www.jahonline.org

Editorial

Continued Knowledge Development for Understanding Bullying and School Victimization

There has been a substantial progression in the bullying and school victimization literature over the past 3–4 decades. Scholars have examined numerous social, psychological, academic, and environmental antecedents to bullying behaviors. These studies have documented these multiple social and psychological factors in a vast collection with children and youth of various ages and in multiple educational settings (e.g., elementary, middle, and high schools and college). Bullying behaviors are fairly common among children and adolescents in community samples. Numerous studies have substantiated the level of bullying behaviors in schools across the globe and have defined a typology for understanding the relationship between bullying behaviors and school victimization. The literature identifies three distinctive categories related to bullying behaviors (i.e., bully, victim, and bully/victim). There are both differences and similarities in the social, psychological, and behavior factors for each category.

The prevalence rates of bullying behaviors are comparatively consistent across continents and cultures, with a range between 29.9% and 40%. For example, in a sample from countries in Asia and Africa, researchers found prevalence rates of bullying behaviors and school victimization of 31.4% in India, 40% in South Korea, 36.3% in South Africa, and 31% in Taiwan [1–5]. Prevalence rates in Australia at 47.3% and the United States at 29.9% are also comparable with other countries [6,7]. However, the levels of prevalence diverge from other countries in the Scandinavian countries of Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. These countries report prevalence rates between 6% and 15.2% [8,9].

Although there are variations in prevalence rates of involvement in bullying globally, the psychological outcomes for youth who bully, who are victims, or who are bully/victims are consistent. Youth who either bully and/or are victims have higher levels of suicidal ideation, depression, and lower psychosocial outcomes [1,6–11]. In light of the findings that youth involved in bullying show generally poorer outcomes, youth who are bully/victims demonstrate the worst psychological outcomes as compared with the other two categories. For example, youth who both experienced being a bully and a victim were found to have the highest risk of suicidal behavior and the worst social/emotional

problems compared with children who were not involved in bullying, were only victims, or were only bullies [1,3,7,8].

Gender is significant when understanding both prevalence and psychological outcomes. In all studies, boys consistently show higher rates of bullying behavior than girls. The higher level of bullying behaviors among boys was found across several countries [2–4,7,10,12,13]. Finally, there is a relationship between the age and the level of engagement in bullying behavior. Several studies found that younger children are significantly more likely to be involved in bullying behavior compared with older youth [3,7,9,10,13].

In addition to the vast amount of epidemiologic research documenting prevalence and onset of bullying behaviors, there is a parallel body of literature documenting the development and testing of various prevention and intervention strategies to decrease bullying behaviors among youth. Several of the more prominent bullying intervention programs have been implemented across the globe. The Olweus Bully Prevention Program focuses on restructuring the social environment in schools to decrease bullying [14,15]. The KiVA Program focuses on the bully/victim dyad and bystanders to impact the classroom, individual students, and the total school environment [16–17]. Youth Matters is theoretically guided by the social development model to improve academic and social/emotional learning to create a culture of safety in schools to lower the incidence of bullying behaviors [18]. The Bulli and Pupe program is targeted at individuals and peer groups using a group-based approach by promoting active involvement as compared with being passive observers to the behavior [19].

Overall, the research on bullying and school victimization is perspicuous regarding the social and psychological outcomes needs of youths engaged in these behaviors. There continue to be areas to expand our knowledge in this global phenomenon. There continue to be inconsistencies in our knowledge regarding the effectiveness of various interventions across cultures. As the literature matures, additional documentation on the program efficacy and effectiveness across gender, race, ethnicity, and cultures is essential.

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The five studies in this issue further advance knowledge on bullying behaviors, school aggression, and victimization. Hepburn et al build on the literature by investigating the relationship between bullying, suicidal ideation, and attempts to commit suicide [20]. Using a multiethnic sample in the United States, they found no differences as related to race, ethnicity, and household language for bullying behaviors. They did find that being born outside of the United States significantly increased levels of school victimization. Similar to other studies, they consistently found differences between bullying involvement and suicidal thoughts and attempts as compared with those not engaged in bullying. Suicidal ideation and attempts were most prominent in bully/victims. Also, using a multiracial and ethnic sample, Ringle et al used a longitudinal sample of high-risk urban youth in the United States to study trajectories for aggression among African American and Hispanic youth and the effects of risk and protective factors [21]. The authors identified distinct trajectory paths for aggression among African Americans and Hispanics. Overall, African Americans were more likely to display aggression as compared with Hispanic youth. Several noticeable risk factors were shown to impact aggression across race groups (e.g., perceived adult alcohol use and peer alcohol use).

The article by Wilson et al takes a somewhat different approach to understanding bullying behaviors in a country with limited or no literature addressing this behavior [22]. These authors use a sample of middle-income youth from the Seychelles, a middle-income country located in sub-Saharan Africa off the coast in the West Indian Ocean. This study examined prevalence and associated factors of bullying behavior in the Seychelles as compared with rates found in higher-income countries. In comparing the results, the study reports that being male increases the probability of being a bullying victim, and friendships decreased the probability of school victimization. Truancy and economic deprivation did not impact bullying behavior, dissimilar to Western countries. The occurrence of bullying found in the Seychelles is similar to other studies measuring bullying occurrences in the region, supporting comparable prevention efforts.

There is a burgeoning body of bullying literature examining the emerging occurrence of cyber bullying. Cyber bullying is prominent in two articles in this issue. Ybarra et al focus on measuring and defining cyber bullying as related to the overall concept of bullying [23]. In their efforts to better understand the term “cyber bullying,” they examine word choices and definitions and the impact the words have on prevalence rates and subjects’ understanding of the various terms and definitions. Sampling both children and adolescents, the authors posit that the measurement of cyber bullying should be within three distinct category components: type, mode of communication, and environment. Ybarra et al also suggest that when only the word bully was used in a measure, accuracy of measure greatly increases, and that the use of the word bully, as opposed to the definition, appears more critical in measuring bullying. Hemphill et al conducted a longitudinal analysis to identify predictors of both cyber and traditional bullying behaviors in Australia [24]. In a sample of secondary students, they investigated the differences and similarities between cyber and traditional bullying. Following students over several years, they found a number of commonalities and dissimilarities. One important finding was that youth engagement in traditional bullying was predicted by a greater number of longitudinal factors as compared with youth engagement in cyber bullying.

Overall, these studies found multiple contextual variables and risk factors associated with bullying and aggression among youth across several countries, cultures, race, and ethnic groups. Given these results, continued programming and interventions to decrease bullying and school victimization are imperative. The continued implementation of evidence-based programs for these behaviors will impact the quality of the educational experience for youth and support more positive social and psychological outcomes. As researchers, we need to continue to build on the knowledge base to advance our program effectiveness. These types of studies are essential to influence funding for program implementation and to continue program development to support organizational transformations in schools and create a more prosocial environment.

James Herbert Williams, Ph.D.

Christopher A. Veeh, M.S.W.

University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work
Denver, Colorado

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