

Bullying Behaviors in Pennsylvania Schools

Center for Schools and Communities

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The past decade has witnessed increased attention directed at preventing school bullying (Griffin & Gross, 2004; Spriggs et al., 2007) due to the far-reaching consequences of being bullied (Olweus, 1991; Spivak & Prothrow-Stith, 2001). Bullying, a form of aggression (Olweus, 1978; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007), refers to repeatedly performed actions designed to harm or disturb another person, who is in a less powerful position (Olweus, 1978). Bullying behaviors encompass a broad range of activities including verbal and physical bullying, social exclusion, cyber-bullying and others. At extremes, it is associated with suicide (James, 2009).

The Center for Safe Schools, a division of the Center for Schools and Communities, coordinates the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) in over 100 schools in Pennsylvania following the award of a major grant from Highmark Healthy High 5, an initiative of the Highmark Foundation. This Research Brief examines bullying levels among 29,764 students in 78 schools in grades 3–12, prior to their implementation of the Olweus program. The schools represent over 25 counties across the Commonwealth. In examining these data, this Research Brief documents the state of bullying in schools where intervention has not yet begun, in turn raising awareness of the level of need present in a large sample of schools.

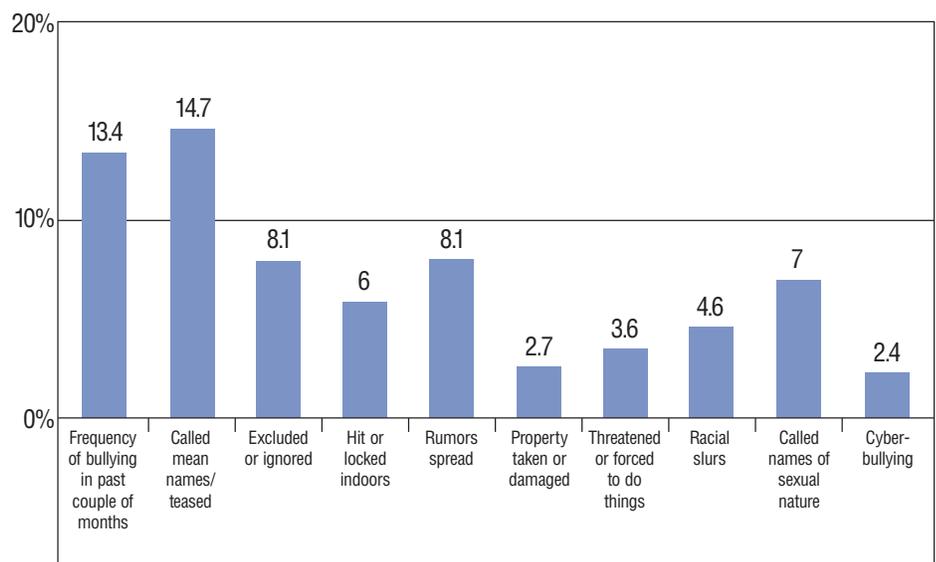
How Was the Analysis Conducted?

Students completed a 39-item, anonymous survey of bullying behavior and experiences in grades 3–12 toward the end of the school year. The participating schools cover the geographic breadth of Pennsylvania, with student representation from rural, suburban and urban areas. Boys and girls are equally represented (51 percent boys), while about 32 percent are from elementary schools, 52 percent are from middle schools and 16 percent in high schools. The majority of students self-report as white (65.3 percent). The survey assesses the frequency that a student has experienced various types of bullying in the past two months with responses ranging from “it has not happened to me” to “about once a week” and “several times a week.” To be consistent with research (Bentley & Li, 1995; Charach, Pepler & Ziegler, 1995; Nansel et al., 2001), we defined a victim of **frequent bullying** if the student answered either “about once a week” or “several times a week” to any bullying survey item. This Research Brief focuses on this group of frequent bullying victims.

How Common is Frequent Bullying?

Figure 1 presents the percentage of frequent bullying victims for several types of bullying behaviors. For example, 13.4 percent of students reported they were victims of frequent bullying overall (once a week or more often), while the most common form of frequent bullying – being called mean names, made fun of, or teased in a hurtful way – was reported by almost 15 percent of the students. The second and third most common forms of bullying were being left out of things/excluded on purpose, and rumors/lies told about the student in order to get others to dislike the student. Approximately six percent of the students reported that they were hit, kicked, pushed, shoved around, or locked indoors. While these statistics suggest a small proportion of students, they are associated with dozens of students in a typical school, and thousands of students across the Commonwealth. Furthermore, victimization occurring once a week or more is known in medical literature to be associated with mental health problems in adulthood (Arseneault et al., 2006; Sourander et al., 2009).

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Who Were Frequent Victims (Weekly or More Often)



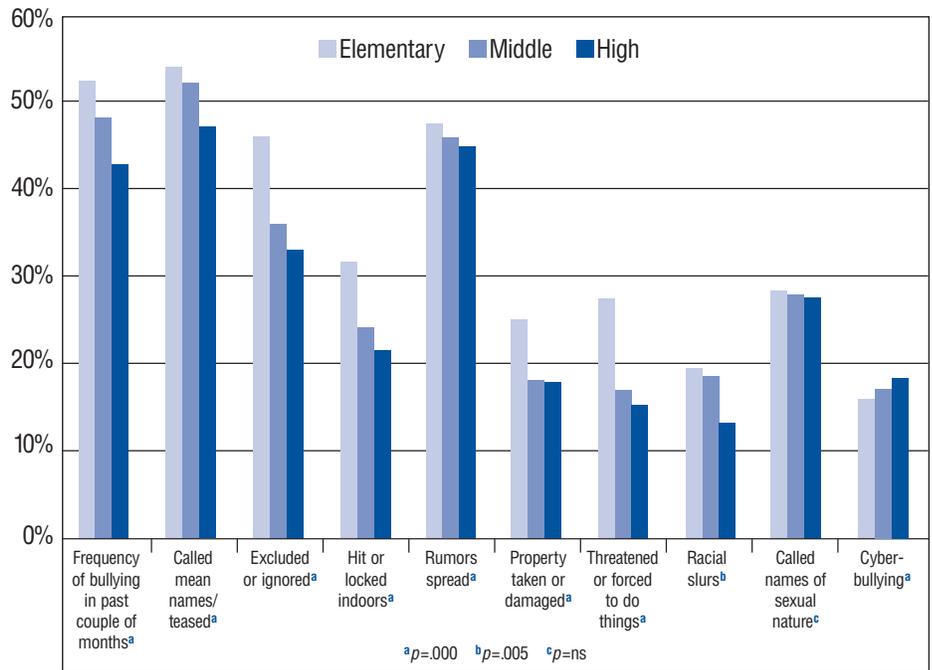
Are Certain Forms of Bullying More Common as a Function of School Level?

Reports by victims of frequent bullying (i.e., at least once a week) differed by school level. In Figure 2, each set of bars shows the amount of frequent victimization within each school level.¹ Elementary school students reported the highest percent of frequent bullying, followed by middle school students, and followed by high school students. The exception was cyber-bullying, wherein reports of frequent bullying were highest among high school students and lowest among elementary school students.

For all three grade levels, being called mean names/teased and rumors spread were the most frequent types of bullying reported, with over two-fifths of all students reporting frequent bullying of these two types. Interestingly, less than twenty percent of the students in all three grade levels reported frequent cyber-bullying and racial slurs. No statistically significant grade level differences were obtained for the frequent report of derogatory comments of a sexual nature, which was reported by almost thirty percent of all students.

School level differences in frequent bullying were most pronounced for being excluded/ignored, hit/locked indoors, property taken/damaged, and being threatened or forced to do things. Elementary school students reported more frequent bullying for each of these types as compared to middle and high school students. Whereas almost half of elementary school children reported frequent exclusion/being ignored, substantially smaller proportions were reported at other levels.

Figure 2: Distribution of “Frequent Victims” by School Level



Are Certain Forms of Bullying More Common Among Boys Than Girls?

There were significant differences between boys and girls in their reports of frequent bullying for being called mean names, hit or locked indoors, property taken or damaged, threatened or forced to do things, racial slurs, and called names of a sexual nature (not illustrated here). The percentages of boys reporting frequent bullying were significantly higher than percentages reported by girls.

Conclusions

The present findings confirm those from other countries (e.g., Norway, UK, Australia, etc.) indicating that bullying is an important issue for school students, particularly for students in elementary and middle schools (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Nansel, et al., 2001). Perhaps most importantly, the results document a substantial

level of bullying victimization across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. If the overall victimization rate above (Figure 1, 13.4 percent) is applied to the 1.4 million public students in grades 3–12 (PDE, 2010), it can be estimated that over 180,000 students are victimized each week or more often. This estimated number of bullying victims warrants close attention to statewide policies that shape school climate, as well as the health consequences that are associated with these children as they transition into adulthood. ■

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¹Significant differences ($p = .005$) in the specific types of frequent bullying by level of education except for “called names of a sexual nature”.

The Center for Safe Schools (CSS), through a unique partnership with the Highmark Foundation, its Healthy High 5 Initiative, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education, created the PA CARES (Pennsylvania Creating an Atmosphere of Respect and Environment for Success) Initiative. PA CARES is a dedicated opportunity to build local school readiness and capacity for the successful implementation of the research-based Olweus

Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) and other proven intervention strategies within approximately 120 schools within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The Center for Schools and Communities is a division of the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, a public education service agency. The Center provides training, technical assistance, resources, grant administration and program evaluation to programs serving children, families and communities in Pennsylvania. This brief is available on the Internet at www.Center-School.org.

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