Misperceptions of Bullying Norms as a Risk Factor Associated with Violence among Middle School Students

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Presenter Disclosures

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No Relationships to Disclose

Abstract

Bullying among adolescents in many countries is a significant school and public health concern. Erroneous perceptions of bullying norms may be important risk factors for being a bully, victim, or bully/victim. Anonymous online surveys were conducted to assess the accuracy of perceived peer bullying norms among youth in 20 middle schools (grades 5 to 9) from 2006 to 2008 in New Jersey and New York (n= 10,668). The survey reveals attitudes about bullying, incidence levels of bullying behavior as reported by perpetrators and victims, and also assesses perceived norms among peers regarding these attitudes and bullying behaviors. Results from the analyses of eight types of bullying behavior show that while bullying is substantial, it is not the norm. The most common (and erroneous) perception, however, is that the majority engage in and support such behavior. Multilevel analysis reveals that perceptions of bullying behaviors are highly predictive of personal bullying behavior—more so than actual school norms. Pervasive misperceptions of bullying may contribute to engagement in bullying and help perpetuate victimization.

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Web-based Survey Instrument

Survey of Bullying at Your School

Please login.

Username: 
Password: 

http://www.socialnormsurveys.org/bullya/ (Enter test for username and password)

School Characteristics

Number of Schools: 19 NJ + 1 NYC area
9 conducted surveys multiple times
35 school cohorts surveyed

Percent on free lunch - mean (range): 23% (1% – 81%)
Percent White - mean (range): 59% (1% – 96%)
Percent Hispanic - mean (range): 16% (1% – 75%)
Percent Black - mean (range): 20% (0% – 47%)
Percent Asian - mean (range): 7% (0% – 41%)
Student/Teacher ratio - mean (range): 12 (8 – 18)
School Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle School Grades</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Middle School Population Size Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14 – 1221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>121 – 764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>947</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>10,668</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample Sizes - mean (range)</td>
<td>305 (10 – 799)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Response Rate - mean (range)</td>
<td>54% (11% – 91%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males / Females - %</td>
<td>48% / 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Levels</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age – mean (range)</td>
<td>12.6 (9 – 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban/suburban</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bully Behavior at School in Last 30 Days:
Actual Prevalence and Perceived Norms
(N=10,668)

Pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, hair pulling, or tripping...

Teasing in an unfriendly way...

Calling hurtful names...

Excluding someone from a group to make them feel bad...

Norm is not to bully but only a minority know it!

Bullying Behavior at School in Last 30 Days:
Actual Prevalence and Perceived Norms
(N=10,668)

Taking or damaging someone else’s belongings

Spreading unkind stories or rumors about someone else

Threatening to hurt someone

Making someone do something they did not want to do

Legend: actual norm misperceived norm accurately perceived norm

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Distribution of Bully Behavior Index
(N = 7,856)*

- Bully index computed as sum of eight measures on a 0-3 scale. Those that never bully would score a 0 while those that frequently bully on all eight items would score 24.

Distribution of Bully Perception Index
(N = 7,728)*

- Bully Perception Index clearly shows massive misperceptions

*Includes only schools where at least 50% of students responded overall from the grades surveyed.
Distribution of Bullying Misperception
(N = 7,728)*

- 8.8% underestimate bullying
- 3.4% are accurate
- 87.8% overestimate bullying

Percent of Students

Misperception of School Bullying Norm

*Includes only schools where at least 50% of students responded overall from the grades surveyed.

Standardized regression coefficients predicting bullying behavior in the last 30 days (N=7,247a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Standardized Coefficient (Beta)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of bullying (index)</td>
<td>.42 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual bullying norm at school (index median)</td>
<td>.08 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male vs. female)</td>
<td>.10 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.09 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (white vs minority)</td>
<td>-.05 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School population size</td>
<td>.00 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (% white at school)</td>
<td>.02 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with free lunch (%)</td>
<td>.01 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/teacher ratio at school</td>
<td>-.02 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes only schools where at least 50% of students responded overall from the grades surveyed.

*Coefficient is significant at p < .001.

ns Coefficient is not significant, p > .05.

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Middle School Social Norms Posters

*Strength in Numbers*

80% of Crystal Lake 6-8th grade students say students should NOT tease in a mean way, call others hurtful names, or spread unkind stories about other students.

*Cooper Middle School students make GREAT CHOICES!*

Most Cooper Middle School students (3 out of 4) DO NOT exclude someone from a group to make them feel bad.

*Did you know that...*

Most Cooper Middle School students (9 out of 10) do NOT take or damage others’ belongings.

*Did You Know That...*

Most Cooper Middle School students (8 out of 10) think that students should tell a teacher or counselor if they or someone else are being bullied at school.

(school names have been changed)

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Intervention Program reduces perceptions and actual bullying behavior!

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