

The causes and consequences of bullying

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

Although public perception of school violence tends to focus on severe forms of violence such as gang fights or assaults with a weapon, others types of aggression merit consideration. There is a need to distinguish between aggressive behavior which occurs when someone seeks to hurt another person and bullying behavior, which is generally regarded as a subset of aggressive behavior. Bullying is a problem that has often been dismissed as a relatively harmless interaction and even considered a normal part of growing up. While numerous studies have examined the prevalence and frequency of bullying in schools within the United States, much remains unknown about the patterns of bullying behaviors at school.

The current research studies in a multivariate, longitudinal context the factors that contribute to bully offending and bully victimization. This dissertation addresses four primary issues: First, it reassesses current research on the basic descriptive elements of the nature and extent of bullying behavior. Second, this dissertation aims to increase the understanding of the factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of being bullied. Researchers have been less concerned in prior work with 'why' bullying occurs than they have with detecting the 'deficits' that the individuals involved, either as bullies or victims, present. The present research advances the literature by examining the role of various factors in shaping the likelihood of being bullied, including relationships with peers, parental influence, school safety, and prior bully victimization experiences. Third, this research goes beyond prior work by developing and testing theoretically informed models of bully offending. The models draw heavily from the literature on bullying as well as the more general literature on delinquency and aggression, but an important focus is addressing the *consequences* of bully victimization, or in other words whether adolescents who are bullied are more likely to subsequently bully others. Fourth, this dissertation examines whether bullying and general offending are separate facets of childhood problems. Past research has linked bullying to offending, however, identifying the inter-relationship of the two phenomena has been neglected.

Previously documented correlates of general victimization and offending serve as a conceptual framework for the models presented. These elements were tested to determine if common covariates of general offending (vandalism, stealing, hurting someone) influence bullying behaviors as well. Data for this dissertation are derived from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Child Sample (NLSY-C). The analysis focuses on children in elementary and middle schools from 1994 to 1996 (N = 959). The age range in 1994 (Time 1) was from 10 to 12 years old and two years older in 1996 (Time 2). When investigating the duration of roles over time, results revealed that bullying behaviors were more persistent over time than general offending behaviors. A significant and strong predictor of bullying at Time 2 is having been a bullied victim at Time 1. Few of the criminological measures or other covariates have any significant influence on either bully victimization or bully offending.

Findings also indicated that bullying and general offending were qualitatively distinct phenomena. Neither prior general offending nor current general offending is a significant predictor of bully victimization or bully offending. Furthermore, the common correlates of general offending are not correlated with bully behaviors. The current study found that measures associated with criminological theories (school, parents, and peers) were not associated with bullying measures.

The results indicate a need to further explore criminological theories relative to bullying behaviors. Bullying should be regarded as an exclusive category of aggression. The current research demonstrates the need to continue to decipher this distinction and determine whether existing criminological perspectives can explain bullying behaviors.

One factor that is related to both bullying and general offending is fear of one's safety at school. A policy implication of this finding is to improve the effectiveness of school safety programs. Finally, the limitations and strengths of this research are thoroughly discussed in order to address how future research can further advance the study of bullying in U.S. schools.