

# Delinquency, Victimization, and Bullying over the High School Transition

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## High School Transition

Students' transition from middle school to high school represents a meaningful period of change during adolescence; for example, students may experience changes in school commitment, perceptions of the environment, and social relations associated with the move to a new school. Teachers and staff are aware of the potential disruptive nature of the transition in terms of preparing students for the academic high school environment; however, there is little information on changes in non-academic behaviors and experiences, particularly delinquency and victimization risk. This report examines the transition to high school by assessing patterns in students' self-reported delinquency and victimization as they move through the middle and high school environment, including specific experiences with bullying perpetration and victimization. By comparing changes in these behaviors over the high school transition to patterns observed in other grade-level changes (i.e., 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade), we can better understand how beginning high school may present a distinct point of change for young students.

The UMSL CSSI surveys were administered to two cohorts of students over three years. In Wave 1, 1,831 7<sup>th</sup> graders and 1,809 8<sup>th</sup> graders were surveyed in 12 middle schools. In the following year 86.4% of this initial sample was resurveyed, then in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Finally, 75.2% completed a third wave of surveys as 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders. In total, 2,681 students were surveyed during all three grades. Approximately 51% of the sample is in Cohort 1 (students surveyed in grades 7, 8, and 9), while the other 49% comprises Cohort 2 (surveyed in grades 8, 9, and 10).

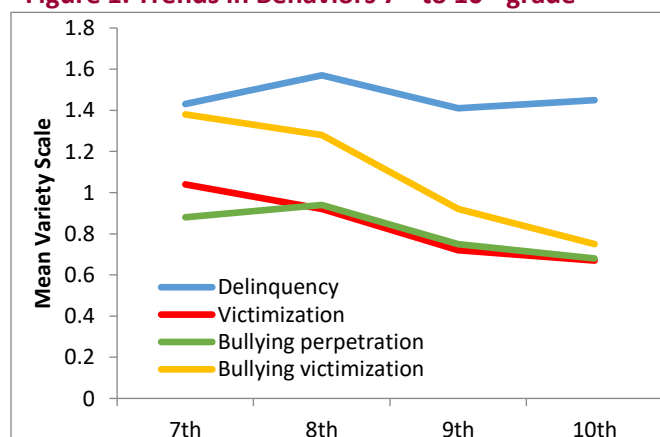
## Measures

To examine how students' experiences changed from one grade to the next, four scales were created to measure: (1) delinquency; (2) victimization; (3) bullying perpetration; (4) and bullying victimization. The delinquency scale

indicates the number of different types of delinquent acts each student reported they had engaged in during the prior 6 months. It includes 13 different behaviors such as stealing, fighting, or vandalizing property. A higher value on the scale means that the student participated in a greater variety of acts. Similarly, the victimization scale representing the variety of victimizations a student experienced in the prior 6 months includes 7 items referring to instances when a student was a victim of similar acts (e.g., theft, being attacked). The variety of bullying behaviors was measured combining 4 items capturing whether students had, for example, said mean things about someone or threatened someone. Lastly, bullying victimization is a 6-item scale indicating the number of types of bullying victimizations each student experienced in the prior 6 months.

A minority of students reported no delinquency or victimization, in general or related to bullying, over the three waves. Specifically, 23% reported no delinquent acts (n=831), 32% reported no victimization (n=1,160), 25% reported no bullying perpetration (n=905), and 30% reported no bullying victimization (n=1,096). When assessing changes in these experiences over grade transitions, we exclude these students to focus on those who do report experience with these behaviors in at least one of the waves.

Figure 1. Trends in Behaviors 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade



## Average Changes in Experiences During Grade Transitions

Figure 1 illustrates the average variety scores over all four grades, combining cohorts for 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades, so that we can observe how these behaviors and experiences change from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Overall, these trends show that delinquency and bullying perpetration increase while in middle school (from 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) before declining with the transition into high school. In contrast, victimization behaviors decline over all four years. Next we compare the magnitude of change over each grade level transition.

Figure 2 shows the percent change in the behaviors as students move from one grade to another. This figure clearly shows the most pronounced decreases in all outcomes during the high school transition (the orange bar) relative to within school transitions (the blue bar for within middle school and the gray bar for within high school). The largest decreases from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade occur for victimization, bullying victimization, and bullying perpetration (all decreasing 20-25%) followed by delinquency decreasing 10%. This decline continues, but lessens, in the move from 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade for all but one of the outcomes. For delinquency, there is a small increase (or leveling off) within high school.

## Considering other factors

Findings suggest some positive consequences of the transition to high school in that these problematic experiences generally tend to be decreasing over time—and that bullying perpetration and delinquency in particular change direction from increasing in middle school to decreasing during the high school transition. This indicates that, in addition to this transition serving as a meaningful change in setting and academic environment, students appear to undergo important behavioral changes. Although the decreases in delinquency and bullying perpetration are notable findings, these patterns should be considered within the context of other psychosocial factors likely affected by the transition. For instance, prior school research suggests that transitions are meaningful times for students because the new school environment may influence their commitment and/or turnover in peer groups.

To investigate further, we examined changes in students' delinquent friends (proportion of friends who engaged in some delinquent activity), school commitment (how much one likes school or values grades), and school disorder (perceptions of problems such as theft or bullying at the school-level) with changes in delinquency to explore how these factors may be associated during the high school transition.

Figure 2. Percent Change in Behavior

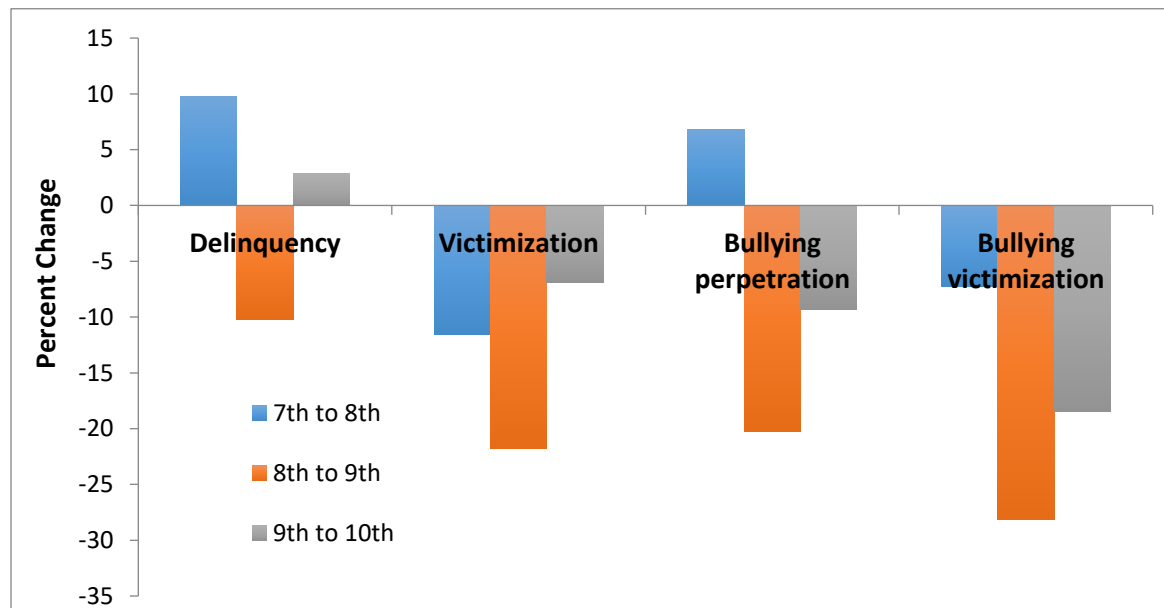
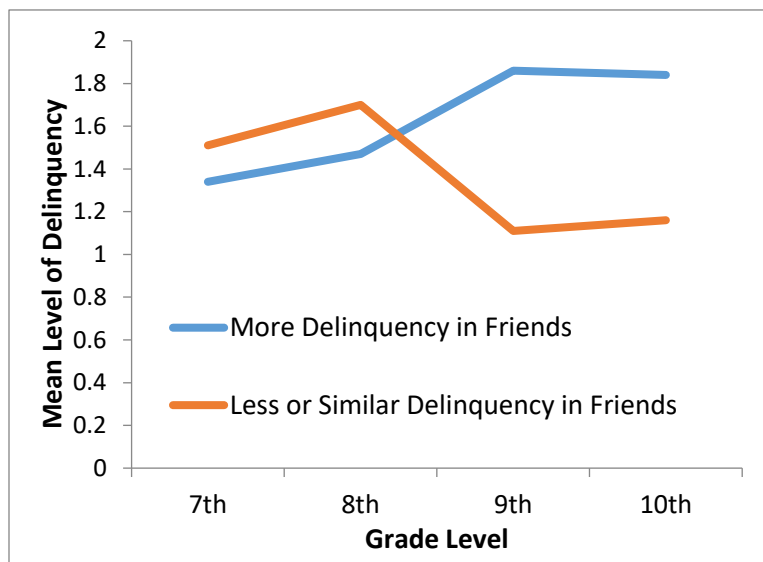


Figure 3 compares the average levels of students' delinquency for those who reported having a higher or lower proportion of delinquent friends in 9<sup>th</sup> grade compared to 8<sup>th</sup> grade ("more delinquency in friends" vs. "less or similar delinquency in friends"). This figure clearly illustrates that peer groups are related to whether students experience increases or decreases in delinquency when transitioning to high school. Delinquency declines for those students reporting that their friends are less delinquent in 9<sup>th</sup> grade relative to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, while it increases for students reporting an increase in delinquency of their friends.

Although not shown here, a similar relationship emerges for school commitment and school disorder. Increases in school commitment are associated with decreased delinquency during the high school transition and decreases in perceived school disorder are associated with decreased delinquency.

**Figure 3. Change in Behavior and Peer Groups**



### Implications

These trends show that, overall, reductions in problem behaviors are most pronounced during the high school transition. Literature on school transitions often highlights the adverse consequences associated with moving to a new school with different demands and social systems to negotiate. In contrast, this report suggests the high school transition may bring positive change

as it is associated with meaningful decreases in problem behaviors.

Moreover, while we cannot say changes in one variable predict changes in the other, analyses show that changes in delinquency during the high school transition are associated with changes in one's peers, school commitment, and school disorder. This information can help to inform programming oriented towards providing support during students' transition to high school.

### Transition Programs

Most interventions assisting with school transitions operate on the individual-level; however, the results of this analysis suggests targeting disorder at the school level can be helpful in reducing problem behaviors as well. For instance, evidence-based multi-level interventions that may not be designed to target school transitions, such as Olweus Bullying Prevention Programs, could assist students during the high school transition by addressing issues (e.g., bullying) at the school-level through organizational changes, while also educating students at the individual-level. Programs using a mentorship design (e.g., Peer Group Connection, Link Crew, and Ignite) that use older high school students to teach incoming freshmen valuable lessons in making positive social decisions as well as navigating academic challenges have been shown to offer promising results for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students. These types of individual-level programming during school transitions can educate students about changing peer groups and prepare them to manage negative peer influence as well as encourage school commitment to foster declines in delinquency as they begin high school.