

Measuring Bullying and Cyberbullying Victimization

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Defining Bullying

Prior research has demonstrated that the way in which bullying is measured largely determines the reported prevalence rate of victimization. Single measures often produce the lowest rates, with the highest rates associated with behavior-specific measures. Obtaining accurate estimates should be of primary interest given that Missouri state law (House Bill No. 1583) requires school districts to provide education and information to students regarding bullying.

The state of Missouri defines bullying as “intimidation, unwanted aggressive behavior, or harassment that is repetitive or is substantially likely to be repeated and causes a reasonable student to fear for his or her physical safety or property; substantially interferes with the educational performance, opportunities, or benefits of any student without exception; or substantially disrupts the orderly operation of the school.” State law defines cyberbullying as occurring “through the transmission of a communication including, but not limited to, a message, text, sound, or image by means of an electronic device including, but not limited to, a telephone, wireless phone, or other wireless communication device, computer, or pager.”

As pointed out in UMSL CSSI Fact Sheet #2, simply asking students “have you been bullied” is the most common approach in survey-based research. The second wave of the CSSI data includes this measure along with other items that capture different dimensions of bullying. For the school-based measures, questions asked if students were bullied at school, had mean or hurtful things said about them, were attacked or threatened, had rumors spread about them, had someone try to make others dislike them, and if they were left out of things on purpose or excluded from their group of friends. The online measures were very similar with the only difference being that students were asked if they were cyberbullied rather than bullied and were threatened online rather than attacked or threatened at school.

Prevalence and Frequency of Victimization

From Table 1 we see that school bullying is more prevalent than cyberbullying across most measures. However, it is clear that rates of victimization vary depending upon the way questions are worded; 17% were victimized using the generic item “have you been bullied” while 34%

Table 1. Prevalence and Frequency of School Bullying and Cyberbullying Victimization (n=2,985)

	Bullied/ Cyberbullied	Mean or Hurtful Things Said	Attacked or Threatened	Rumors Spread	Someone made others dislike you	Left out or excluded on purpose
	%	%	%	%	%	%
At School (any)	17	34	4.0	26	27	18
Once	4.1	6.7	1.4	9.3	8.2	5.3
More than once	13	28	2.5	17	19	13
Online (any)	6.0	9.3	5.8	9.0	9.5	7.5
Once	1.7	3.2	1.8	2.7	2.6	2.4
More than once	4.3	6.0	4.0	6.3	6.9	5.1

NOTE: There were 180 respondents who did not answer all items and are thus excluded.

had mean or hurtful things said to them (with 28% reporting this happened more than once). Over a quarter of respondents report having rumors spread about them and having someone try to make others dislike them at school. There is less variation among the online measures, as victimization ranges from a low of 6% to a high of almost 10%.

There is also considerable variation among the frequency of behavior-specific items. Most definitions of bullying require repetition, and rates of victimization are reduced when considering repeated events. Although 17% of the sample reported being bullied, 13% report that this happened more than once. Across all items, the prevalence of both school and online victimization is reduced when restricting focus to repeated events. Interestingly, more respondents reported repeated victimization related to mean/hurtful comments, rumors, and having someone make others dislike them than reported being bullied or cyberbullied.

Multiple Measures of Bullying Victimization

Given that there are multiple ways of measuring bullying, some students may report experiencing some forms of victimization but not others. Table 2 compares respondents who answered yes and no to the single-item bullying question with those who reported on the five behavior-specific items. We see that among those who reported they were not bullied at school, over a third reported they experienced one or more of the bullying-related behaviors depicted in Table 1. Moreover, 22% of those who considered themselves non-victims of “bullying” reported experiencing at least two of

Table 2. Behavior-Specific Responses by “Bullied” and “Non-bullied” Students (n=2,985)

	Not Bullied (n=2,487)	Bullied (n=498)
	%	%
1 or more items*	38	93
2 or more items	22	77
3 or more items	12	56

NOTE: Bullying-related items include mean or hurtful things said, attacked or threatened, rumors spread, someone made others dislike you, and left out or excluded on purpose

*Prevalence rate of 47% when combining columns

these bullying-related incidents. Recall only 17% of the entire sample reported being bullied.

Table 3. Behavior-Specific Responses by “Cyberbullied” and “Non-cyberbullied” Students (n=2,985)

	Not Cyberbullied (n=2,805)	Cyberbullied (n=180)
	%	%
1 or more items*	15	88
2 or more items	6.2	71
3 or more items	3.0	56

NOTE: Cyberbullying-related items include mean or hurtful things said, threatened, rumors spread, someone made others dislike you, and left out or excluded on purpose

*Prevalence rate of 20% when combining columns

Similar findings emerge in Table 3, which considers the behavior-specific items related to online bullying. Although only 6% of the sample reported they were cyberbullied, 15% of those who considered themselves non-victims of “cyberbullying” report experiencing at least one or more of the online bullying-related items. Around 6% of these non-victims reported two or more items, which corresponds to the percentage of the entire sample who report they were cyberbullied. Additionally, 12% of those who said they were cyberbullied reported experiencing none of the cyberbullying-related items.

Conclusion

These findings highlight that school personnel should be careful in how they assess bullying in their schools. Missouri’s definition covers a variety of behaviors, and based on the CSSI data, the prevalence of school bullying ranges from a low of 17% using the generic item to as high as 47% using behavior-specific measures. Using the same criteria, cyberbullying could be as low as 6% and as high as 20%. Simply considering one or two behaviors and the level of frequency of incidents of victimization can have a large impact on the reported prevalence of bullying. These issues are especially important to keep in mind when making comparisons across different schools and districts.