

Do Students Understand Bullying? Comparing Experiences and Perceptions

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Identifying Victims of Bullying

Previous fact sheets have considered the prevalence and overlap of bullying and cyberbullying victimization (Fact Sheet #2) as well as issues related to measuring these experiences (Fact Sheet #3). This latter fact sheet revealed that over a third of respondents reported bullying mismatch, meaning they indicated in one section of the survey that they were not bullied but in subsequent questions they reported experiencing one or more bullying-related victimizations. The misclassification of bullying can impact prevention programs if we continue to base them on adult definitions of bullying, which may or may not target the behaviors experienced by youth. In order to shed light on how students understand bullying, this fact sheet uses the second wave of the UMSL CSSI to look at bullying perceptions (reporting one has been bullied) versus experiences (reporting behaviors related to bullying).

Comparing Overlap Among Generic and Behavior-Specific Measures

Table 1 provides information on respondents who indicated they experienced one of seven types of behaviors that can be classified as school bullying. These respondents are broken into two groups based on the generic, single-item measure of bullying: those who reported they were bullied and those who said they were not bullied. For example, 807 (479 + 328) students reported that someone spread rumors about

them (a common indicator of bullying behavior). Of these 807 students, 479 responded that they had not been bullied and only 328 indicated that they had been bullied – a 59% mismatch ($479/807 \times 100$). We see that for five of the items, the majority of students who reported these experiences indicated they had NOT been bullied. The mismatch is less pronounced for the two more “serious” forms of bullying victimization (32% for “being attacked or threatened on way to or from school and 33% for being attacked or threatened at school).

Table 2 examines the same information but focuses on cyberbullying. With one exception, the majority of those who experienced cyberbullying-related victimizations reported they were not cyberbullied. Among those who reported they were threatened online, just under half (48%) reported they were not cyberbullied.

The results from Tables 1 and 2 highlight that there is considerable confusion surrounding the meaning of the term “bullying”; many students who report at least one bullying victimization FAIL to report being bullied. This has implications for national surveys that classify respondents as victims of bullying if they experience one or more bullying-related behaviors (e.g., the National Crime Victimization Survey). This finding begs the question: what behaviors do students think comprise bullying victimization?

Table 1. Examining Perceptions of Being Bullied at School Among Those Who Reported Experiencing Bullying-Related Behaviors

School-Bullying Behaviors	Generic item		% Mismatch (% no on generic but yes to individual item)
	Not Bullied	Bullied	
Mean/hurtful things	622	439	59
Rumors spread	479	328	59
Someone made others dislike you	518	340	60
Left out	306	246	55
Attacked/threatened to/from school	21	45	32
Had things stolen	292	191	61
Attacked/threatened at school	42	86	33

Table 2. Examining Perceptions of Being Cyberbullied Among Those Who Reported Experiencing Cyberbullying-Related Behaviors

Cyberbullying Behaviors	Generic		% Mismatch (% no on generic but yes to individual item)
	Not Bullied	Bullied	
Mean/hurtful things	168	124	58%
Threaten online	88	95	48%
Rumors spread	163	116	58%
Someone made others dislike you	178	124	60%
Left out	144	86	63%

Mismatch Considering Multiple Behaviors

Table 3 considers respondents who experienced multiple bullying-related victimizations and how these individuals responded to the generic bullying item (i.e., have you “been bullied at school”). A school-bullying variety score was created that indicates the number of different types of bullying victimization experiences each student reported. For example, a value of 2 identifies respondents who experienced 2 different types of victimization, and a value of 7 refers to those who experienced all 7 types. Once again, the percent mismatch refers to those who indicated they were not bullied on the generic item but reported that they had experienced one or more of the behavior-specific victimizations.

These findings lead to a similar conclusion as those using behavior specific measures of bullying –

many students who have reported experiencing specific forms of bullying victimization do not report that were bullied. For example, among those students who reported experiencing three different bullying-related behaviors, 67% (188) did NOT answer the generic bullying question affirmatively. Even among those students who experienced at least four different bullying behaviors, 52% reported they were NOT bullied. We also note that approximately half of the sample (1,524 out of 3,165) were not the victims of any of the behaviorally specific forms of bullying, and only 30 of these students reported they had been bullied. This suggests that while our list of bullying-related behaviors captures most of the behaviors that students consider bullying, there are some behaviors that were missed.

Table 3. Examining Mismatch Among Those Who Experienced Multiple Forms of School Bullying-Related Victimization

School-bullying Variety Score	Generic		% Mismatch
	Not Bullied	Bullied	
0	1524	30	98%
1	398	69	85%
2	281	105	73%
3	188	92	67%
4	118	111	52%
5	48	75	39%
6	5	26	16%
7	2	20	9%
Any victimization	1040	498	68%

Table 4 looks at the same information for cyberbullying, where the degree of mismatch for any victimization is slightly higher. Here we see that almost three out of four respondents (72%) who experienced cyberbullying-related victimization did NOT report they were cyberbullied. Once again, only half of those who experienced four or more types of victimizations reported they were bullied.

Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate that many youths who experience multiple victimizations do not report being bullied. If we consider the most common types of victimization, this means that youth who have mean and hurtful things said to them, had rumors spread about them, had someone make others dislike them, AND were left out of things on purpose, still do NOT identify as a victim of bullying. In order to investigate the implications for interventions, the next set of analyses examine the types of youth who report bullying mismatch.

Table 4. Examining Mismatch Among Those Who Experienced Multiple Forms of Cyberbullying-Related Victimization

Cyberbullying Variety Score	Generic		% Mismatch
	Not Bullied	Bullied	
0	2465	24	99%
1	260	36	88%
2	92	28	77%
3	53	30	64%
4	32	32	50%
5	2	47	4%
Any victimization	439	173	72%

Differences Across Sex and Race

Table 5 focuses on mismatch among the full sample and across sex and race. Looking at the full sample column, we see that about 34% of all respondents experienced one or more bullying-related behaviors but did not report being bullied. However, these findings vary across demographic characteristics. Males are more likely to report mismatch (39%) compared to females (28%), and white respondents are somewhat less likely to report mismatch (31%) compared to black respondents (36%). When considering cyberbullying, the same pattern holds for sex, where males are more likely to report mismatch. However, there are only minor differences across race.

Conclusion

These findings underscore the need to develop a better understanding of how youth experience victimization. Bullying has unique attributes including intent, repetition, and a power differential. However, researchers often conflate bullying with peer victimization by focusing on single incidents that may or may not be viewed as bullying. This runs the risk of targeting the wrong youth which has implications for policy and interventions. This is especially relevant given the differences across sex and race since certain youth are more likely to identify behaviors as bullying. Moreover, even among students who experiencing multiple bullying-related victimizations, mismatch between experiences and perceptions persists.

The current research reveals a substantial disjunction between self-reported victimization of specific behaviors relative to a generic measure of bullying. Moving forward, researchers are encouraged to more fully explore the behaviors that students consider to be bullying. Additionally, future efforts might examine factors that predict bullying mismatch, including school/neighborhood characteristics and antisocial attitudes. Given that studies continue to examine the consequences of bullying victimization, identification of victims is a key measurement issue that must be resolved in order to appropriately inform policy.

Table 5. Percent of Any Bullying Mismatch in the Full Sample and Across Sex and Race

	Full Sample	Sex		Race		
		Male	Female	White	Black	Other
School Bullying Mismatch	34	39	28	31	36	34
Cyberbullying Mismatch	14	16	12	14	14	15

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