
Characteristics of bullying victims in schools

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Background

The study explores the characteristics of bullying victims aged 14-16 in 2004-06 using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). The consequences of bullying can be severe in terms of young people's mental wellbeing, attitudes towards school, educational attainment and even potential suicide risk. It is therefore vital to gain more information about those young people who are particularly at risk of bullying so that policy interventions can be based on good evidence and targeted at the right groups. Previous research tells us that race and ethnicity, religion, culture, sexuality, disability, being a young carer and having special educational needs are all likely to make young people more susceptible to bullying. However, no previous research has attempted to take account of a large number of other factors that might explain the relationships between these characteristics and bullying. This study therefore represents the first in-depth investigation of these characteristics in relation to bullying of secondary school pupils in England. We were also able to look at five self-reported sub-types of bullying (name calling, social exclusion, being threatened with violence, being the victim of violence and being forced to hand over money or possessions) to see whether the characteristics of young people who experience different types of bullying might be different.

Key findings

- Almost half the young people reported being bullied at age 14 (47%), but the proportion decreased with age to 41% at age 15 and 29% by the age of 16.
- The most common type of bullying reported was name calling (31% at age 14, 15% at age 16), followed by being threatened with violence (20% at age 14, 13% at age 16), being a victim of actual violence (18% at age 14, 10% at age 16), being socially excluded (17% at age 14, 11% at age 16) and finally being forced to hand over money or possessions (3% at age 14, 1% at age 16).
- Characteristics associated with being bullied included being female (although boys were more likely to experience physical types of bullying), being white, having a religion the young person felt to be very important to them (although only for name-calling) having a SEN (Special Educational Need) or disability, having been in care, living in a step family, being a young carer and having changed school at age 14-15.
- Young people whose parents also reported that they were being bullied were more likely to 'escape' bullying by the age of 16, suggesting that parental awareness might be a key factor in helping young people to escape being bullied.
- Young people who had reported being bullied had lower Key Stage 4 scores than other young people. They were also more likely to leave full time education at the age of 16, and were particularly likely to be NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Methodology

We used data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE). This is a study which began in 2004 by interviewing over 15,500 young people in Year 9, as well as their main and secondary parents if they were available. The same young people have been re-interviewed every year, and we were therefore able to follow their progress up to age 16 when a number of them left full time education. A total of 12,500 young people were still in the study by this age.

The LSYPE dataset contains information on the young person's family characteristics, their experiences of school, and both their own and their parents' attitudes and aspirations. The data have also been linked to the National Pupil Database (NPD), which allows us to analyse these pupils' attainment at Key Stage 4 and provides information on school-level factors such as the proportion of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in the young person's school.

We used this dataset to explore relationships between various factors and the likelihood of a young person reporting that they had experienced bullying whilst controlling for a range of other factors. We looked at the five different types of bullying identified in the LSYPE survey: being called names (including text and email bullying), being socially excluded, being forced to hand over money or possessions, being threatened with violence and being a victim of actual violence.

Characteristics of the young people we looked at included their gender, ethnic group, importance of their religion, whether they had SEN or a disability, their social position and family structure, a range of school characteristics and whether the young person's main parent also reported that they were being bullied. We were also able to explore links between bullying and educational outcomes at the age of 16.

Please note that, although we can infer from these analyses that certain characteristics of young people are risk factors for being bullied, we are unable definitely to confirm direct causal links.

Results

Prevalence of bullying

The reporting of bullying was much more prevalent among the younger age groups. Almost half of young people reported being bullied at age 14 (47%), but this proportion decreased with age to 41% at age 15 and 29% by the age of 16. As with overall bullying, the prevalence of reporting being a victim of each different type of bullying also decreased with age, although some types decreased more than others.

The most common type of bullying reported was name calling, with 31% of young people reporting this type at age 14, but this had decreased to 15% of young people by age 16. Second was being threatened with violence which 20% of young people reported experiencing at ages 14 and 15, falling to 13% at age 16. Violence and social exclusion had similar levels of prevalence, with around 18% of young people reporting these types of bullying at age 14, falling to around 10% at age 16. By far the least common was being forced to hand over money or possessions, with only 3% of young people reporting this type at age 14, falling to 1% by age 16.

Characteristics of bullying victims

Gender

Girls were more likely to be bullied than boys at the ages of 14 and 15, but this difference had disappeared by the age of 16. Girls were especially more likely to report psychological types of bullying (such as being called names and being socially excluded). Boys were more likely to report more physical types of bullying (such as being forced to hand over money or possessions, being threatened with violence or being victims of actual violence).

Ethnicity and importance of religion

Young people from minority ethnic groups were less likely to be bullied than white young people. There was little relationship between bullying overall and the importance of a young person's religion after ethnic group had been adjusted for. We did however find that young people whose religion was very important to them were more likely to report being called names than other young people. This suggests that bullying associated with young people's religion may be a more significant issue than bullying associated with their ethnicity.

Special educational needs

Young people with SEN were more likely than other young people to report all types of bullying at all ages, and were particularly likely to report having been forced to hand over their money or possessions. These results indicate that young people with SEN are a group particularly vulnerable to bullying (possibly because they are perceived as being different from other young people).

Disabilities

As with SEN, young people with disabilities were more likely than other young people to have reported all types of bullying. Again similar to young people with SEN, they were also particularly likely to have reported being forced to hand over their money or possessions.

Being in care

There was a strong relationship between having been in care and reporting being bullied, and one which for most types of bullying increased in strength with age. As with other factors which might mark young people out as different from others, young people who had been in care were particularly likely to have had their money or possessions taken from them, and they were also more likely to have been continuously bullied across the three years of the study.

Social position

We found little relationship between bullying and socio-economic status or household tenure, suggesting that bullying is not related to social position as we might have expected, i.e. that it is not those young people who are the most socially disadvantaged who are also the most likely to report being bullied. Instead, there is some evidence to suggest that those with better-educated mothers are more likely to be bullied: young people whose mothers had no qualifications were less likely to be bullied at ages 15 and 16.

Family structure

Young people living in step families (and to a lesser extent those in single parent families or with neither biological parent in the household) were more likely to be bullied. These young people were particularly likely to report threats of violence or actual violence at all ages. Young people who had caring responsibilities in their household were also more likely to be victims of bullying.

Parental reports of bullying

Young people who reported being bullied at the age of 14 or 15 whose parents also reported

them being bullied were more likely to 'escape' being bullied by the age of 16 than those whose parents did not. This relationship was particularly strong for young people whose parents had also reported that they were being bullied at the age of 14. The findings suggest that parental awareness may be a key factor in helping these young people to escape being bullied.

Changing school

Young people who had changed school in the previous year were more likely to experience most types of bullying. They were also more likely to be 'continuing victims' across all three years of the study, and were more likely to become victims of bullying at their new school if they had not previously been bullied. However, those young people who were already being bullied were more likely to escape bullying if they changed school. Changing school may therefore have different implications for different young people. For some, a change may reduce the risk of being bullied, and might even be the reason they changed schools. For others, being the new pupil in the school might lead to an increased risk of being bullied. These relationships were not found among young people who had changed school during the year previous to Year 11, although this may be partly due to the fact that changing school was less common in this year and sample sizes were therefore very small.

School characteristics

We found a number of characteristics of the school that were associated with bullying, including the proportion of pupils receiving free school meals (FSM), the proportion of pupils with SEN and whether the school was a mixed or single sex school. Pupils attending schools with higher proportions of pupils receiving FSM were less likely to report being bullied, and especially unlikely to report name calling. However, pupils attending schools with more pupils with SEN were more likely to report being bullied and especially likely to report being called names (the most common type of bullying identified). Boys attending all-boys' schools were more likely to be bullied than those attending mixed schools, but girls attending all-girls' schools were less likely to be bullied than girls attending mixed schools.

These results show that characteristics of a school can affect pupils' risk of being bullied in different ways. However, the level of variation in young people's experiences of bullying that was attributable to differences in the schools attended was minimal compared to differences in the characteristics of the young people themselves.

Educational attainment at Key Stage 4

Young people who had reported being bullied at secondary school had a significantly lower Key Stage 4 (GCSE and equivalent) score than those who hadn't reported being bullied. This was particularly true for young people who had been forced to hand over money or possessions, and for young people who had been socially excluded. This relationship may relate to issues such as disengagement from school and increased levels of truancy, which are likely consequences of bullying and which also lead to lower attainment later on. If we are able to reduce bullying in schools then more young people may remain engaged with their education and their subsequent attainment may be higher.

Main activity at age 16

Young people who reported being bullied were less likely to be in full time education at age 16 than those who did not. These young people appeared to be involved in three main alternative activities: they were more likely to be in full time work (particularly those who had reported being threatened with violence or the victim of actual violence), and were also more likely to be in part time college and part time work (particularly those who reported being forced to hand over money or possessions). However, the strongest relationship we found with main activity at age 16 was that young people who reported being bullied were much more likely to be NEET than those who were not bullied (this was true for all types of bullying but particularly those who reported being socially excluded or forced to hand over money or possessions). Again, this is likely to relate to subsequent disengagement and possibly truancy from school, although the results also indicate that some of these young people continue their education or training outside the school environment. However, the increased likelihood of young people becoming NEET following the experience of being bullied is likely to have severe consequences for their future.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the range of characteristics related to bullying is wide and complex. However, we found a number of themes that may be useful to policy makers. For example, many of the characteristics of bullying victims (such as having SEN or a disability, being a young carer or having been in social

services care) are factors that may mark the young person out as being different from others. In addition, we have shown that different types of young people (particularly boys and girls) are more likely to be victims of different types of bullying. Finally, we also found that school characteristics can affect young people's risk of being bullied (including the proportion of pupils with SEN and whether the school is a single-sex school), although their impact is relatively minor compared to the characteristics of the young people themselves.

One consequence of these results is an increased awareness of the kinds of young people who are at greatest risk of being bullied in our schools today. In the development of policies to reduce bullying, particular effort should be made to ensure that more is done to support these groups of young people. A greater although somewhat more difficult ambition would be to increase understanding and tolerance of diversity in the classroom and reduce the victimisation of those who are different. This might be partly achieved through an increase in lessons that focus on issues relating to diversity. The importance of interventions is clearly illustrated by the strong relationships we found between bullying and both attainment at Key Stage 4 and the likelihood of becoming NEET at age 16. These results show that bullying can have a powerful impact on young people's future prospects, and that it needs to be tackled as early as possible.

Additional Information

The full report (DFE) can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Laura Edwards, 3rd Floor, DFE, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

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