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YOUTH BULLYING: AN OVERVIEW AND RELATED INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract: Bullying is a form of violence that can leave lasting negative effects on school-aged youth. This literature review examines research on bullying frequency, predictors and impacts, and prevention and intervention programs. Research finds that between 20% and 40% of youth in the United States have experienced bullying (with variances in data sources and groups examined) and that there are a host of negative outcomes for those exposed to it. Programs that address bullying vary, but there are several promising interventions to address the issue.

Introduction

Bullying refers to actions in which an individual in an imbalanced power relationship intentionally and repeatedly inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort on another.[1] Bullying is a form of youth violence that creates an adverse childhood experience. Adverse childhood experiences have been linked to physical health issues, mental health issues, and decreased opportunity in adulthood.[2]

Traditional bullying includes physical aggression, verbal threats and insults, and exclusion from groups.[3] Physical bullying includes physical aggression toward a victim such as hitting, kicking, pushing, pinching, tripping, spitting, making offensive hand gestures, or damaging the victim's belongings.[4] Verbal bullying occurs when the aggressor uses words to cause distress to the victim and can manifest in name-calling, teasing, sexual comments, taunting, or making threats.[5] Psychological bullying, sometimes referred to as relational or indirect bullying, occurs when the aggressor attempts to harm the victim's reputation or relationships. This includes spreading rumors, ostracizing or shunning the victim, intimidating the victim, and embarrassing the victim in front of others.[6] Cyberbullying has emerged as a less traditional form of bullying coinciding with increased use of technology and the internet and includes activities that occur via electronic means, such as text messaging, emails, website, or other forms of social media.[7] Examples include posting embarrassing pictures of someone online, forwarding private messages, and sending threatening online messages to someone either privately or publicly.

Bullying may involve several players: the bully, the victim, the bully-victim, and the bystander. The bully is the aggressor, the victim is the target of bullying and aggressive behavior, the bully-victim engages in bullying and also experiences victimization, and the bystander witnesses the bullying behavior. [8] Additionally, there are four types of bystanders: assistants, reinforcers, outsiders, and upstanders (also referred to as defenders).[9] Assistants join in on bullying, reinforcers support the bully (e.g., by laughing at the bullying scenario), outsiders do not participate in the bullying and withdraw from the situation, and upstanders takes steps to stop the bullying and stand up for the victim.[10] In terms of location, bullying can occur in a variety of settings and across a variety of ages—from children in elementary schools to adults in the workplace.

The aim of the current review was to examine school-based bullying involving adolescents. We examined school-based bullying in the context of both youth development and violence prevention with a focus on the prevalence, predictors, and impacts of youth bullying and research on select school-based bullying prevention programs. We searched key words, such as *bullying*, *youth bullying*, and *cyberbullying* on research databases (Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and SAGE Journals) and the internet (Google, CrimeSolutions.gov, and blueprintsprograms.org). We specifically sought meta-analyses and systematic reviews addressing the topics of youth bullying and youth bullying prevention. We also conducted reference searches from relevant literature.

Prevalence of Bullying

Overview

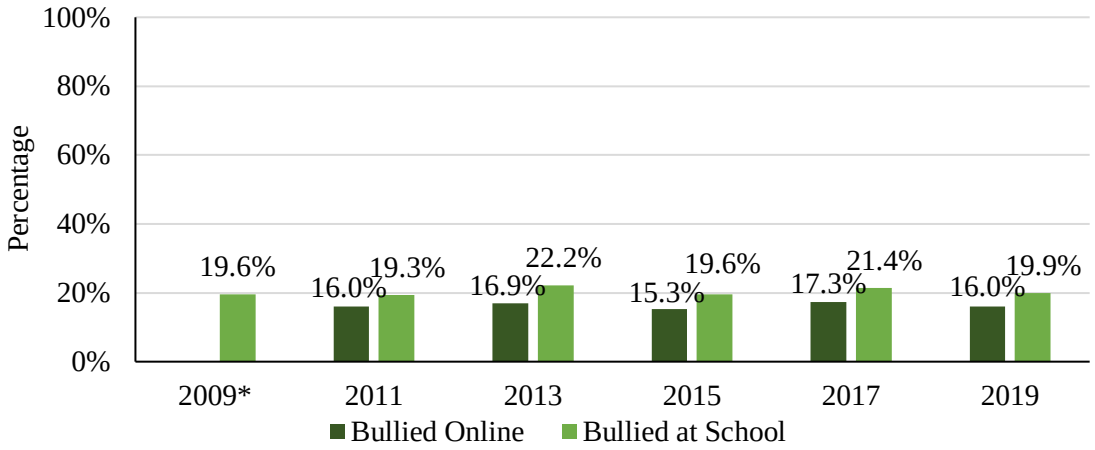
A 2014 meta-analysis found that, across 80 international studies indicating self-reported rates of bullying perpetration and victimization in youth ages 12 to 18, the average perpetration rate of traditional bullying was 35%. The average perpetration rate of cyberbullying was 15%.[11] Similarly, the average traditional bullying victimization rate was 36% and the average cyberbullying victimization rate was 15%.[12]

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has forced many schools to shut down globally, with many replacing in- person classroom instruction with virtual classrooms. This shift to virtual learning and overall increase in use of technology may have impacted youth's exposure to cyberbullying. For example, one study showed that abusive tweets originating from Illinois increased 30% following March 1, 2020, with Illinois appearing as one of the top 10 states averaging the largest numbers of abusive tweets per week.[13] More research is needed to determine the pandemic's impact on youth cyberbullying rates.

The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS) is a biennial national survey of 9th through 12th grade students conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The survey aims to "monitor health behaviors that contribute markedly to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the United States."[14] In 2019, YRBS data indicated 15.7% of U.S. high school students reported being electronically bullied that past year, while 16.0% of Illinois high school students reported being electronically bullied.[15] Furthermore, 19.5% of U.S. high school students and 19.9% of Illinois high school students reported being bullied in school.[16] Data from the YRBS indicates that in Illinois, rates of cyberbullying and bullying in school have remained consistent over the years (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Percentage of Illinois High School Students Reporting Bullying by Location, 2009-2019



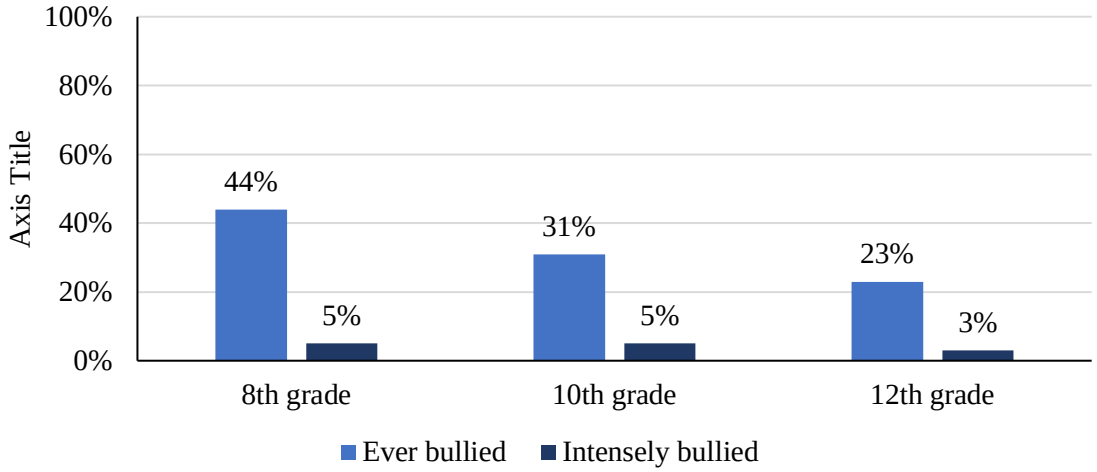
Note. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *1991-2019 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey data.* http://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/.
* Survey did not collect online bullying data in 2009

The Illinois Youth Survey (IYS) is a biennial school-based, self-report survey funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services "designed to gather information about a variety of health

and social indicators including substance use patterns and attitudes of Illinois youth."[17] The 2018 Illinois Youth Survey indicated 44% of 8th, 31% of 10th, and 23% of 12th graders experienced at least one type of bullying in that past year (Figure 2), suggesting the frequency of bullying reports decreases as individuals age through the school system.[18] Additionally, 5% of 8th and 10th graders and 3% of 12th graders reported being intensely bullied (experiencing name calling, threats, physical aggression, and cyber bullying) in 2018.[19]

Figure 2

Percentage of Illinois Students Reporting Ever Being Bullied and Being Intensely Bullied, 2018



Note. Center for Prevention Research and Development. (2018). *Illinois Youth Survey 2018 frequency report: State of Illinois.* University of Illinois, School of Social Work. https://bit.ly/3mJEfoa.

As illustrated, the two data sources show differing rates of reported bullying. These differences may be due in part to the bullying measures applied by the surveyors. To measure bullying at school, the YRBS ask, "During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?" while the IYS asks the more specific questions of "During the past 12 months, has another student at school: bullied you by calling you names?", "During the past 12 months, has another student at school: threatened to hurt you?", and "During the past 12 months, has another student at school: bullied you by hitting, punching, kicking, or pushing you?"[20] Youth completing the YRBS may have been less likely to report being bullied as the question was not specific about what constitutes bullying.

By Sex[i]

A 2013 study based in Portugal found that boys were more likely to report bullying others and to report being bullied by others at least once during the current school term.[21] Additionally, the researchers found a statistically significant difference between boys and girls in physical aggression—boys were significantly more likely to report being physically bullied than girls.[22] A global study found that young men reported engaging in bullying at higher rates in the 40

[i] Terminology used throughout this section (e.g., boy/girl, young men/young women, male/female) reflects the terminology used in the data source.

countries examined, while young women reported being victims of bullying at higher rates in 29 countries.[23] A 2010 meta-analysis found that, across 153 international studies examining factors that predict bullying and victimization for youth, boys were more likely to be involved in bullying than girls as the victim, the bully, or the bully-victim.[24] The strength of this gender effect, however, was weak (for victimization) and small (for bullies and bully-victims).[25] A 2019 examination of gender differences in bullying found that in five international surveys (consisting of four school-based surveys and a single in-person interview) males were more likely to bully others.[26] Four of the surveys revealed males also were more likely to be bullied by others.[27]

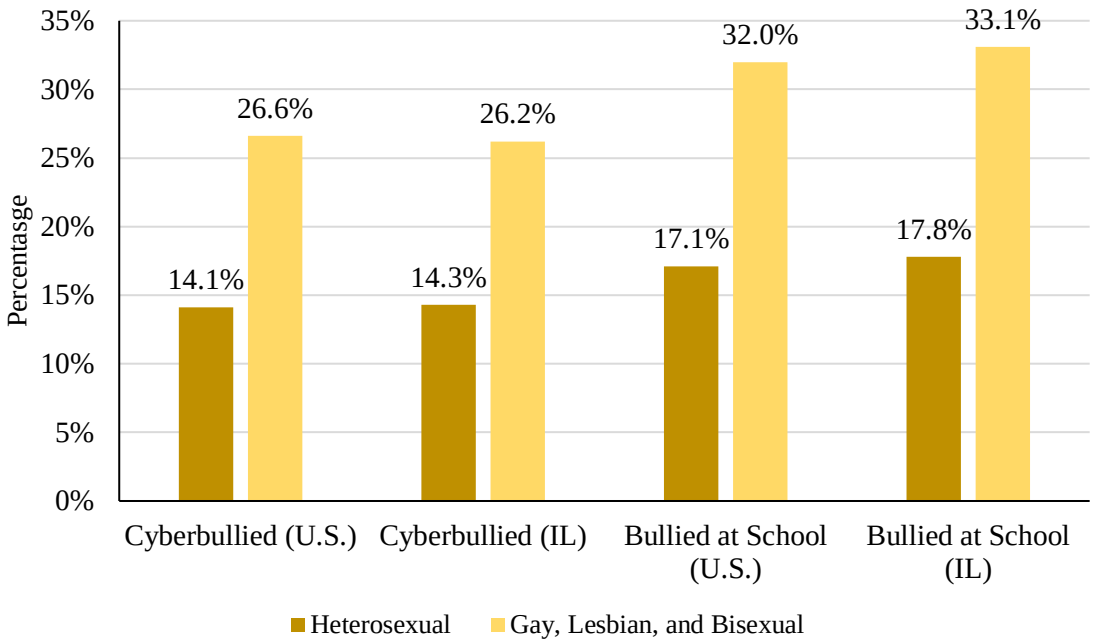
YRBS data indicated that, in 2019, high school females were more likely to report being electronically and traditionally bullied than males. More specifically, 20.4% of females and 10.9% of males reported being electronically bullied and 23.6% of females and 15.4% of males reported being bullied on school property.[28] This trend has remained consistent over time. YRBS data showed that between 2011 and 2019, electronic bullying and at-school bullying rates for females were consistently higher than the rates for males.[29] This trend was comparable in Illinois—in 2019, 18.6% of females reported being electronically bullied compared to 13.3% of males and 20.2% of females reported being bullied on school property compared to 19.3% of males.[30]

By Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

A national survey of students ages 13 to 21 found that 81% of respondents identifying as LGBTQ (an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning—typically used as an umbrella term for the community as a whole[31]) reported verbal bullying based on their sexual orientation and about 45% reported experiencing cyberbullying based on their sexual orientation in the past year.[32] YRBS responses also suggest that high school students identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual experience bullying at higher rates (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Percentage of Students Reporting Cyberbullying and Bullying at School, By Sexual Orientation (2019)



Note. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *1991-2019 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey data.* http://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/.

Furthermore, female respondents identifying as gay, lesbian, or bisexual were more likely to report being bullied at school and electronically than males within the same population.[33]

Research also indicates that gender non-conforming youth, or youth whose gender identity or expression does not match the gender norms that are associated with their sex assigned at birth, are more likely to be the bullying victims. A stratified random sampling survey of youth between the ages of 13 and 18 found that gender non-conforming youth were statistically more likely to report being bullied over the course of their lifetimes and being bullied in person, by phone call, by text message, online, or in some other way than cisgender (a term to indicate persons whose gender identity and expression align with the gender norms associated with the sex they were assigned at birth) youth.[34]

By Race/Ethnicity

A 2018 meta-analysis of 53 studies found small, insignificant effect size differences in bullying perpetration between Asian, Black, Biracial, Hispanic, Indigenous, and White youth.[35] Some studies have found, however, that White students report bullying at higher rates than their Black or Hispanic peers.[36] YRBS data collected between 2011 and 2019 indicated that, nationally, White high school students consistently reported being electronically bullied at higher rates than Black and Hispanic students.[37] Additionally, between 2009 and 2019, White high school

students reported being bullied at school at consistently higher rates than Black and Hispanic students.[38]

Predictors and Impact of Bullying

The Bully

A 2016 meta-analysis found that age and conduct, social, and school problems were predictors of bullying behavior.[39] Specifically, younger age, greater school problems, and greater conduct problems were associated with increased bullying behavior.[40] Youth who bully were more likely to engage in behaviors such as smoking, drinking, fighting, and vandalism than peers who did not engage in bullying behavior.[41] Research also suggests that boys and young men are more likely to engage in bullying than girls and young women.[42] Engaging in bullying behavior has been found to be a risk factor for later criminality, violence (such as teen dating violence, suicide, and sexual harassment perpetration) and the development of antisocial personality disorder.[43]

The Victim

Youth who are at greatest risk for bullying victimization are perceived as different from their peers, less popular, have lower self-esteem, are deemed weak or vulnerable, identify as LGBTQ, have a disability, or do not relate well to others and are seen as isolated.[44] A 2016 meta-analysis found that the greatest predictors of bullying victimization were conduct problems, social problems, having a tendency to internalize problems, and prior victimization.[45]

A 2017 meta-analysis of 165 studies found that victims of bullying are at increased risk for mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, non-suicidal self-injury, tobacco use, and illicit drug use.[46] Furthermore, research has shown that victims of bullying behavior have lower self-esteem, greater social isolation, reduced academic achievement, and have increased risk for truancy and missing school.[47] A 2018 meta-analysis of 16 studies reported that the negative effects of bullying victimization decrease over time, highlighting that negative outcomes of victimization may not continue into adulthood.[48]

The Bully-Victim

Youth that are both bullies *and* victims have been shown to struggle with psychosocial functioning more than youth that are just bullies or just victims.[49] Research also suggests that boys and young men are more likely to be bully-victims.[50] Bully-victims often have issues with aggression, school performance, substance use, social acceptance, and mental health.[51] Those who are both victims and bullies are at greater risk of developing disorders such as depression, anxiety, psychosis, and antisocial personality disorder later in life than youth who are just victims, just bullies, or those who do not engage in either.[52]

The Bystander

Those who witness bullying, whether they intervene or not, are referred to as bystanders.

Bystanders may participate in bullying by encouraging the bullying behavior or providing an audience to the bullying behavior, thus increasing the likelihood that the bullying behavior will continue.[53] Conversely, some children, known as "defenders" or "upstanders" come to the defense of the child who is being bullied, either confronting the bully or providing comfort to the victim.[54] Without intervention, children have been found to defend their peers from bullies 10% of the time.[55]

Simply witnessing bullying behaviors can have a negative impact on youth. Compared to students who did not report witnessing or engaging in bullying, those who witnessed bullying were at higher risk for negative mental health outcomes.[56] Studies specifically on upstanders are fairly recent. However, most bullying prevention programs recognize the power of upstander intervention.[57] When bystanders intervene, there is more than a 50% chance that the bullying will cease.[58] In a meta-analysis examining school-based programs aimed at changing bystander behavior, students in schools that received programming were statistically more likely to intervene than those who did not receive programming; however, this effect size was small.[59]

Addressing Bullying: Descriptions of Select Bullying Prevention Programs

Addressing bullying is important in any context, but especially in the school setting because "bullying can affect the social environment of a school, creating a climate of fear among students, inhibiting their ability to learn, and leading to other antisocial behavior."[60] Because bullying is seen as a form of violence, many interventions take a violence prevention approach guided by public health principles. Table 1 shows two frameworks for characterizing violence prevention approaches.

Table 1

Types of Violence Prevention Approaches

Population	**Description**
Universal	Targets the general population
Selective	Targets those at highest risk
Indicated	Targets those involved
Timing	**Description**
Primary	Addressing risk factors for violence before violence occurs
Secondary	Addressing specific subpopulations that are at a greater risk for violence or immediately following violence
Tertiary	Addresses those who are involved in violence
Suppression	Addresses violence after it has already occurred through specific deterrence and incapacitation

Note. Adapted from Abt, T. P. (2017). Towards a framework for preventing community violence among youth. *Psychology, Health, & Medicine, 22*(S1), 266-285. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2016.1257815 and Escamilla, J. (2020). *Violence prevention: Basic ideas for approaches and coordination.* Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. https://icjia.illinois.gov/researchhub/articles/violence-prevention-basic-ideas-for-approaches-and-coordination#fn17.

Anti-bullying programs can approach prevention in a variety of ways (e.g., addressing the general population or targeting youth who are already involved in bullying). Anti-bullying programming varies amongst locations (e.g., in-school vs. out of school) and those involved in program activities (e.g., students, staff, and/or families). Furthermore, anti-bullying programs are not the only way to potentially prevent and reduce bullying behaviors, reduce risk factors for bullying, and improve protective factors against bullying. Positive youth development programming works to set youth on positive life trajectories and, while bullying prevention is not a directly focus, may help to reduce the risk for bullying and victimization.[61]

Online registries Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development and CrimeSolutions.gov provide information on a variety of evidence-based and evidence-informed bullying programming. Program ratings are offered by the Blueprints, which offers a registry of 89 evidence-based interventions found to reduce antisocial behavior and promote healthy development in youth.[62] Blueprints certifies programs as "*promising*" (interventions that meet the minimum standards of effectiveness), "*model*" (interventions that meet a higher standard of effectiveness and indicate greater confidence in the program's ability to change behavior and targeted outcomes), or "*model plus*" (interventions that meet all standards met by a model intervention plus have been replicated independently from the original program).[63] CrimeSolutions.gov is a registry of programs/practices and their impact on criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services outcomes.[64] Crime Solutions rates interventions as "*no effects*" (interventions with strong evidence suggesting no effects or harmful effects on outcomes of interest, when implemented with fidelity), "*inconclusive*" (interventions that made it past the initial review but evidence as to their effectiveness was inconclusive), "*promising*" (interventions with some evidence indicating that they achieve intended outcomes), or "*effective*" (interventions with strong evidence of achieving intended outcomes when implemented with fidelity).[65] The following section describes select school-based bullying programs listed in the registries.

Steps to Respect

Steps to Respect is a school-based, universal prevention program that addresses bullying at multiple levels: school, staff, family, individual, and peer-group.[66] The program seeks to systemically address bullying through the development of school policy/staff trainings, the presentation of classroom lessons, and a two-hour family presentation.[67] The overall goal of the program is to reduce bullying through increased staff awareness, developing social responsibility, and teaching social-emotional skills that encourage healthy relationships.[68] A 2005 evaluation utilizing a randomized control design found that students in schools that implemented the Steps to Respect program self-reported a lower acceptance of bullying/aggression, a greater sense of responsibility to intervene with friends that bullied, and a greater perceived adult responsiveness to bullying than control schools.[69] Furthermore, schools that implemented Steps to Respect reported fewer observations of aggressive behavior, fewer observations of argumentative social interactions, and more observations of agreeable social interactions than control schools.[70] Similarly, a 2011 randomized control trial of Steps to Respect found that schools that received the programming reported a 31% reduction in physical bullying perpetration and a 27% increase in agreement that teachers/staff were effectively preventing bullying.[71] Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development certifies the program as promising; CrimeSolutions.gov rates the program as effective.

Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is a school-based selective and universal prevention program, originally developed and implemented in Norway.[72] The program aims to reduce and prevent bullying through interventions at the school, classroom, and individual levels.[73] At the school level, students, faculty, and staff contribute to an assessment of the nature and prevalence of bullying within the school.[74] At the classroom level, students engage in discussions and activities that highlight anti-bullying norms.[75] At the individual level, the program is focused on bullies and victims of bullying.[76] Overall, the program seeks to reduce the opportunities or rewards for anti-social behavior and encourage and reward pro-social behavior.[77] A 2018 longitudinal evaluation of the program found reductions in students being bullied and bullying others.[78] Between baseline and two years after first assessment, the percentage of students being bullied fell across all grade levels, with a 2.6% average reduction.[79] A similar trend was seen in the percentage of students bullying others, with an average reduction of 3.3% across all grade levels.[80] Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development certifies the program as promising and CrimeSolutions.gov rates the program as promising.

KiVa Antibullying Program

The KiVa Antibullying Program is a school-based, indicated and universal prevention program developed in Finland.[81] The program serves students in grades 1 to 9 through three grade groupings (1-3, 4-6, and 7-9).[82] The program uses 20 hours of student lessons that aim to raise awareness on group influences in bullying, increase empathy towards victims, and encourage strategies to support victims.[83] Furthermore, the program utilizes an antibullying computer game that allow students to learn new information and test their knowledge on bullying.[84] Antibullying posters are placed throughout the school, recess supervisors wear bright vests to increase visibility, and parents receive a written guide with advice on how to prevent and reduce bullying.[85] Bullying cases are handled in school with group discussions and follow-up meetings involving the victim, bully and school personnel.[86] Additionally, school personnel meet with prosocial classmates of the bullying victim to encourage them to support the victim.[87] A 2011 evaluation of the program found that students who received the KiVa program experienced a 30% reduction in self-reported victimization and a 17% reduction in self-reported bullying in comparison to control schools.[88] A randomized control trial based in Italy found that middle schools that implemented KiVa saw a 12.9% reduction in reported victimization and a 41.9% reduction in reported bullying of others from pre- to post-implementation.[89] This reduction was significantly greater than in control schools, which saw a 15.4% reduction in reported bullying of others and a 22% *increase* in reported victimization.[90] Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development certifies the program as promising and CrimeSolutions.gov rates the program as promising.

Learning Together

Learning Together is a school-based universal prevention program that utilizes all-school staff trainings, restorative practices, student and staff action group meetings, and lessons on social and emotional skills.[91] The program seeks to reduce bullying and aggression while improving student

health and well-being.[92] The program lasts three years and spans grades 8 through 10.[93] A 2018 study utilized a clustered experimental design with follow up at 24 and 36 months. The researchers found that control schools reported bullying victimization at a statistically significant higher rate than experimental schools.[94] The study did not find a statistically significant difference in aggressive behavior between control and experimental schools.[95] Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development certifies the program as promising.

Positive Action

Positive Action is a comprehensive, school-based social emotional learning program for elementary- and middle school-aged kids.[96] The program aims to increase positive youth behavior, social emotional skills, and positive school environment, while decreasing negative youth behavior.[97] The Positive Action curriculum includes lessons two to four times a week (roughly 140 lessons in kindergarten through 6th grades and roughly 82 lessons in 7th and 8th grades), covering six units.[98] The curriculum also includes school-climate programs (to help reinforce the classroom curriculum) and a counselor's kit (that provides school-based mental health professionals with resources for students that may need more intense help).[99] A matched, randomized control trial found students who participated in the Positive Action program reported a 41% reduction in bullying behaviors, a 31% reduction in substance use, and a 36% reduction in violent behavior, compared to students in control schools.[100] Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development certifies the program as model and CrimeSolutions.gov certifies the program as effective.

Conclusion

Research indicates that between about 20% to 40% of youth in the United States have been exposed to traditional bullying, with variances in this prevalence by data source, gender, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Bullying is a form of violence and an adverse childhood experience, placing those who witness or experience it at an increased risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including decreased school achievement and psychosocial functioning. Studies on the long-term effects of exposure to bullying help inform how schools, families, and community address bullying and mitigate its negative impacts. While research supports several promising school-based bullying intervention and prevention programs for addressing bullying-related behaviors, studies should continue to expand the research base, specifically through randomized control trials or high-quality quasi-experimental designs. Additionally, research should continue to explore the effects of and interventions for addressing cyberbullying, especially as technology advances and changes. High quality research on the long-term effects of being exposed to bullying will help inform how schools, families, and communities address bullying and reduce the negative impact of this specific type of violence. As such, schools should continue to take bullying and cyberbullying seriously and aim to

implement evidence-based and evidence-informed programming, more specifically "model plus" or "effective" programs, within their curriculums to address bullying and cyberbullying.

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