

A cross-national profile of bullying and victimization among adolescents in 40 countries

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Abstract

Objectives: (1) To compare the prevalence of bullying and victimization among boys and girls and by age in 40 countries. (2) In 6 countries, to compare rates of direct physical, direct verbal, and indirect bullying by gender, age, and country.

Methods: Cross-sectional self-report surveys including items on bullying and being bullied were obtained from nationally representative samples of 11, 13 and 15 year old school children in 40 countries, N = 202,056. Six countries (N = 29,127 students) included questions about specific types of bullying (e.g., direct physical, direct verbal, indirect).

Results: Exposure to bullying varied across countries, with estimates ranging from 8.6 % to 45.2 % among boys, and from 4.8 % to 35.8 % among girls. Adolescents in Baltic countries

reported higher rates of bullying and victimization, whereas northern European countries reported the lowest prevalence. Boys reported higher rates of bullying in all countries. Rates of victimization were higher for girls in 29 of 40 countries. Rates of victimization decreased by age in 30 of 40 (boys) and 25 of 39 (girls) countries.

Conclusion: There are lessons to be learned from the current research conducted in countries where the prevalence is low that could be adapted for use in countries with higher prevalence.

Keywords: Bullying – Victimization – Prevalence rates – Country comparison.

Introduction

Countries throughout the world have identified bullying as a leading adolescent health concern^{1–3}. Studies from individual countries such as Canada⁴, the United States⁵, Lithuania⁶, Israel⁷, Poland⁸ and Greenland⁹ have described the prevalence of bullying and victimization. Several studies have examined correlates of bullying, including its association with mental and physical health problems¹⁰, academic problems¹¹, and delinquency and crime¹². National and more local studies have also examined the epidemiology of bullying and profiled its psychosocial correlates^{1,4,5}, yet few cross-national studies

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have been conducted. Existing studies have either involved a limited number of countries, or have not considered specific types of bullying and developmental (or age) changes¹³.

The Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey 2005/06 provided an opportunity to study bullying in a large multinational sample of school-aged children. In this study, there are over 200 000 school children from 40 different European, North-American countries and Israel that were questioned about bullying and being bullied. This goal of this paper is to compare contemporary estimates of the prevalence of bullying and victimization among adolescents across countries, using standard measures. In a subset of countries we examine these changes for specific subtypes of bullying.

Bullying is defined as the use of power and aggression to cause distress or control another^{1–3}. The use of power and aggression may be carried out through direct and indirect forms of aggression. Direct bullying can include physical aggression (hitting, kicking) and verbal aggression (insults, racial or sexual harassment, threats). Indirect bullying is the manipulation of social relationships to hurt (gossiping, spreading rumors) or exclude the individual being victimized. With evolving developmental capacities the nature of bullying and victimization may change with age. Direct aggression of a physical or verbal nature is common in young children^{14,15}. As children age, physical aggression tends to decrease and verbal aggression increases¹⁶. As children develop in their social understanding, they become more capable of indirect forms of aggression. To date no study has examined a multi-country comparison of age related changes in forms of bullying. We hypothesize that physical bullying and victimization will decrease with age and verbal and indirect bullying will increase. There are also gender-specific differences in the developmental progression of aggressive strategies, with girls implementing indirect aggression more than boys¹⁶. Since the forms of aggression vary with age and differ by gender, we expect that the type of victimization that children experience would reflect a similar developmental pattern.

If these age- or gender related patterns of bullying are consistent in our cross-country analyses, we can begin to speculate on the associated universal developmental processes that are the mechanisms of these differences. The use of “age group” in this study will serve as a proxy for investigating the importance of these varying psychosocial and developmental contexts in influencing bullying typology among adolescents. If the age and gender patterns are not consistent, we will need to consider the cultural contributions to these variations.

This paper aims to compare estimates of the prevalence of bullying and associated victimization, and how these patterns change with age in adolescence and across countries using standard measures and methods. In addition, the relevance

of the developmental context was investigated and the occurrence of direct physical, direct verbal, and indirect types of bullying is described in a subsample of 6 countries. Finally, age and gender differences in bullying across countries will be examined. We expect that the age-related patterns will be similar across countries, although the prevalence will likely vary due to larger cultural factors.

Methods

Study population and procedures

School-based anonymous surveys were conducted during the 2005/06 school year according to a common HBSC research protocol¹⁷. Each participating country surveyed a representative sample of school children ages 11, 13 and 15 (approximately grades 6th, 8th and 10th) using identical sampling methods¹⁸. Sampling unit was a classroom within schools selected by a weighted probability technique to ensure that students were equally likely to be included. All students belonging to a sampled classroom (and present on survey day) were included in the sample. Some countries stratified by local relevant demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, language of instruction, etc. To address clustering effects within classroom, the sample requirements were for a minimum of 1,500 respondents for each of the three age groups, totaling approximately $n = 4,500$ per country and resulting in a total of $N = 202,056$ sampled children across all 40 countries. This inflated sample size made it possible to obtain sufficient confidence intervals of $\pm 3\%$ for representative estimates with sample design effects no more than 1.4 times greater than would be obtained from a simple random sample.

Study measures

Two mandatory questions on bullying and victimization were included in the survey and were used by all 40 participating countries ($N = 202,056$). Six countries, Italy, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Israel, Canada, and the United States ($N = 29,127$ students), included optional questions about specific types of bullying, enabling to assess the typology of bullying across those countries.

Children who are bullied, victimized, and who have dual status (bully-victims)

In all 40 countries, participants were asked to report how many times they had been bullied at school in the past 2 months and how often they had taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past 2 months¹⁸. Possible responses were: never, once or twice, 2 or 3 times a month, about once a week, or