

Bullying behaviour norms, perceived bullying norms, and personal victimization among UK youth as predictors of self-assessed isolation at school

H. Wesley Perkins, Jessica Perkins, and David Craig

Abstract

This study assesses variation in students' self-assessments of personal isolation in school as predicted by their personal experiences of victimization, the prevalence of peer bullying at their school, and their perceptions of the prevalence peer bullying. The data were collected between 2007-2010 in an online survey of year 5-11 students (N=4780) attending 26 schools located in a large borough of Greater London. The survey measures attitudes about bullying, incidence levels of personal bullying perpetration and victimization, and perceived school-wide norms regarding these measures as well as students' sense of emotional isolation and detachment from others (versus a sense of well-being and social integration). As demonstrated in previous research on other problems behaviours, while bullying is substantial, it is not the norm. Although perceptions of the school norm vary considerably within schools, the most common (and erroneous) perception is that the majority engage in and support such behaviour. Students' degree of self-assessed isolation is significantly predicted, not only by actual victimization experiences as other research has demonstrated, but also by perceptions (often misperceptions) of the prevalence and degree of support for bullying among school peers. The association between perceived bullying prevalence and self-assessed isolation remains strong in multilevel regression analysis that controls for personal victimization levels and variation in aggregate bullying perpetration levels across school sites. Thus, the research suggests that students' emotional well-being may be improved by reducing both actual bullying victimization in schools and the common misperception that most peers support and engage in frequently bullying.