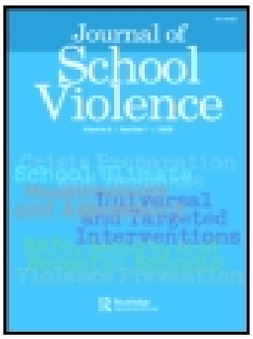

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Bullying in Middle Schools: Results from a Four-School Survey

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The suicide of a cyberbullied student prompted the school-aged authors of this article to administer a Child Abuse Prevention Services survey to 587 students in seventh and eighth grades at four schools. Results showed that 4 of 5 students felt bullying is a problem, with 1 in 3 admitting to having bullied someone. Of those who did nothing when they witnessed bullying, 4 of 10 gave as the reason, "It wasn't my business." While three quarters of respondents felt "safe/very safe" in school, many are perpetrators (one third) and victims (half). With over half reporting doing nothing the last time they saw someone being bullied, and

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We thank the Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS), Roslyn, New York, for sharing its survey instrument used for this study; Dr. Duolao Wang, a statistician at the University of London who offered invaluable guidance and expertise; the middle schools for agreeing to be part of this study; Paul Auster who administered surveys at one school; the parents of the teen authors of this article who gave ongoing support; and Jeffrey Johnston's family, whose efforts made the Florida Anti-Bullying Bill (2007) possible. We dedicate this article to Jeffrey Johnston.

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1 in 4 stating they did not intervene because they "didn't care," a concerning level of apathy toward bullying was revealed.

KEYWORDS bullying, child and adolescent health, emotional health, research

PREVALENCE OF BULLYING

Bullying among school-aged youth is common. Survey data collected in the 1990s indicated that 40% to 80% of school-aged children in the United States were targets of bullying (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). In a more recent study, almost 30% of youth Grades 6 through 10 reported being involved in bullying—as bully, target, or both (Nansel et al., 2001). Half of 1,229 children aged 9–13 years (fourth through eighth graders) in a 2005 study said they had been bullied at least once in a while; in this study, about 1 in 7 respondents considered him- or herself a frequent victim, reporting being bullied at least *weekly* (Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005). A 2006 study with 1,500 young people age 10–17 years indicated that cyberbullying among teens and preteens increased 50% in the last five years as youth increasingly chronicle their lives on web logs and socialize online through chat rooms, instant-messaging, and websites (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006).

BULLYING DEFINED

Distinct from aggression that is used reactively or in response to provocation such as in self-defense, bullying is characterized by proactive manifestations of aggression and a power differential between the bully and the target (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Olweus, 1993). Three crucial elements in the bullying definition include repetition, harm, and unequal power (Berger, 2007). This imbalance of power means that a more dominant person or group intends to harm or disturb a less dominant person or group repeatedly over time (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying can include both direct actions, such as threatening, hitting, or stealing, and indirect strategies such as name-calling, teasing, giving "dirty" looks, spreading rumors, or intentional social exclusion (Olweus, 1994; Tarshis & Huffman, 2007).

Most research still finds that boys bully more than girls (Nansel et al., 2001; Berger, 2007; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, Rantanen, 1999; Charach, Pepler, & Zeigler, 1995) and that both sexes are crueler to those of the same sex than of the other sex (Tarshis & Huffman, 2007). Studies have also indicated that bullies and

victims are more likely to be middle school age (Nansel et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2005; Espelage, 2004).

Furlong et al. (2003) made a compelling entreaty to all those who care about the issue of school bullying to arrive at a consensus on a universal definition of bullying. This common understanding is needed for the scientific purpose of having precision in what is being studied and because without such a definition a confusing and inconsistent array of national, state, and local policies to the problems created by bullying may result (Furlong, Morrison, & Greif, 2003).

CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

Bullying can have negative physical, emotional, and social consequences for both victims and perpetrators (Nansel et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2005; Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Nansel et al., 2004; Van der Wal, de Wit, & Hirasing, 2003). Both perpetrators and targets of school aggression are at risk for incarceration, depression-suicide, and problems in school functioning (Olweus, 1993; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Children who bully are more likely to get into fights, vandalize property, and drop out of school (Olweus, 1993). The abusive nature of bullying, indicating a lack of regard for others, is an important risk factor for engaging in more serious violent behavior.

Results from a study by Nansel et al. (2003) concluded that bullying others and being bullied are related to self-report of weapon carrying in and out of school, physical fighting, and being injured in a physical fight (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003). Investigators of a study on school-associated violent deaths found that homicide perpetrators were more than twice as likely as homicide victims to have been bullied by peers (Anderson et al., 2001). Olweus (1993) reported that 60% of boys who were bullies in middle school had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24 (Olweus, 1993). In fact, 23-year-old Cho Seung-Hui, the gunman responsible for the April 16, 2007 shooting deaths of 32 Virginia Tech students, had been bullied while in middle and high school (Apuzzo, 2007), and the two male students responsible for the Columbine, Colorado killings had also been victims of bullying (Associated Press, 2007).

Debilitating health symptoms including headaches, abdominal pain, poor sleep, bed wetting, and feeling sad have been associated with bullying (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996). Young people who bully are also more likely to smoke and drink alcohol (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Although bullying and victimization in the United States may first be identified in elementary school, the problem becomes particularly acute, in terms of frequency and severity, in early adolescence (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). Our knowledge of bullies and victims and their peer affiliations during this period remains limited (Pelligrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999).

The 2005 suicide of a repeatedly cyberbullied student in a Florida middle school prompted the school-aged authors of this article to team up and consider ways to increase awareness of bullying in their own schools. To learn more about the prevalence and types of, and actions taken by students with respect to, bullying (including cyberbullying) in the middle school years, with the ultimate goal of creating individually tailored school-based anti-bullying campaigns, we administered a survey in 2006 at each of four schools. In this article, we report descriptive information on the frequency of bullying and victimization, and examine differences between boys and girls and seventh and eighth graders, based on the results from our four middle school survey.

METHODS

Sample

We collected data from 587 seventh and eighth graders attending schools located in Miami, Florida; Naples, Florida; Palo Alto, California; and Baltimore, Maryland.

Instrument

We administered the Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS) Middle School Bullying Survey containing 14 items (see Appendix) (the instrument used for this study is herein called the "Middle School Bullying Survey"). This survey was developed by Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS) located in Roslyn, New York, in response to its school bully intervention program assessment needs. From 2004 to 2006, CAPS pilot-tested the survey in two schools and administered the survey in various schools during which it fine-tuned each survey iteration until items ceased to elicit problems from respondents. To CAPS' and our knowledge, the final version of the survey has not been used for research purposes elsewhere. Questions on the Middle School Bullying Survey relate to personal experiences with, and observations of, bullying (including cyberbullying); the degree and frequency of bullying; actions taken as a result of bullying and the reasons behind them; and feelings

of safety in school. The school-aged authors of this article agreed this survey sought answers to similar questions they had about students in their own schools.

The survey form was on a single page and took approximately five to 10 minutes to complete. All questions were closed-ended with a maximum of five answer choices. For each question, we asked students to select the most appropriate response category. We did not collect any personal identifiers and all respondents remained anonymous.

Procedure

In May and June 2006, four seventh, ninth, or eleventh graders (three are authors of this article) administered the Middle School Bullying Survey in their schools.

An independent institutional review board (IRB) informed the project-related students before they administered the survey that the study protocol met the criteria to be exempt from IRB approval because the survey was anonymous and one that middle school students were not required to take; only those students who agreed to complete the survey would voluntarily participate. Students who chose not to complete the survey were either excused from the classroom or engaged in other schoolwork, as determined by individual teachers. The students also secured permission from CAPS to use its survey.

We sought permission from participating school administrators and teachers to administer the survey in a seventh and/or eighth grade classroom(s). See Table 1 for a summary of informed consent procedures, more details on the methods of survey administration, total number of surveys included at each of the four participating schools, and respective school response rates.

Data Analysis

One team member manually tallied the survey results on an Excel spreadsheet and another team member cross-checked the data entries to confirm accurate inputting. We calculated descriptive statistics (numbers and proportions) for each demographic variable (gender, grade) and each topic response (bullying and victim experiences). We compared frequencies of responses to topic questions by respondent characteristics (gender, grade, and bullying and victim experiences) using chi-square analysis of cross-tabulations. We considered differences to be statistically significant at the .05 level. Due to the low number of surveys received from some of the participating schools, we were not able to conduct an inter-school analysis.

TABLE 1 Summary Procedure for Middle School Bullying Survey Administration

School	Informed consent procedure	Method of administration	Total no. surveys distributed	Total no. surveys returned	Total no. surveys included in study	Response rate
School A (Miami, Florida)	Received permission from principal; sent "opt-out" letter to parents (signature was required only if parents did not want their child to participate).	Distributed surveys to seventh and eighth grade students during social studies class.	700	496	400	57%
School B (Naples, Florida)	Received permission from school administrators during an in-person meeting.	Distributed survey to all seventh and eighth graders in school.	58	58	22	38%
School C (Palo Alto, California)	Received permission from math teacher.	Distributed survey to seventh grade students in five math classes.	110	110	107	97%
School E (Baltimore, Maryland)	Received permission from principal.	The principal distributed the survey to all seventh and eighth graders.	116	58	58	50%
Total surveys included in study (*N*)					587	

RESULTS

We analyzed 587 surveys, 42.3% completed by boys and 57.7% by girls. About half of the respondents were seventh graders (n = 288) and half were eighth graders (n = 299); 25.1% were white, 13% black, 3.2% Asian, 53.6% Hispanic, and 5.1% other/multi-ethnic. Table 2 summarizes the highlights of the statistically significant findings.

Extent of the Bullying Problem at School

Only one of five students (18.4%) felt bullying is not a problem in their school. Four of 5 (81.6%) students felt bullying is a problem of some magnitude in their schools. Almost half (47.6%) reported bullying is at least a

TABLE 2 Summary Highlights of Statistically Significant Findings from the Bullying in Middle Schools Four-School Survey

Survey item	Male	Female	*p*-value*	Seventh grade	Eighth grade	*p*-value*
Reported bullying is a "very bad problem"	22	9	<.00	1	8	<.00
Told an adult when they saw someone being bullied at school	13	28	<.04			
Got friends to help when they saw someone being bullied at school	11	29	<.04			
Reported "didn't care" for reason for not doing anything the last time they saw someone being bullied				38	68	<.03
Reported "ignoring bully" last time they were bullied	53	107	<.00			
Reported "pushing/hitting the bully" last time they were bullied	80	47	<.00			
Reported ever bullied someone				125	97	<.01
Reported feeling safe at school	160	273	<.00			
Reported physical safety as primary concern	64	40	<.04			
Reported "other reasons" as primary safety concern	50	52	<.04			
Reported ignoring or blocking a cyberbully	39	81	<.00			
Reported doing nothing when cyberbullied	59	53	<.00			
Reported cyberbullying the cyberbully	58	42	<.00			

Note. Numbers represent the number of respondents reporting the stated action in each survey item.
*p-value comparing males and females and seventh and eighth grades using chi-square analysis of cross-tabulations.

"medium-sized" problem. Almost one in five (17.3%) thought bullying is a "bad" or "very bad" problem, with 71% of students reporting bullying being a "very bad" problem being male ($p < .00$). Of the students who reported bullying being a "very bad" problem, eighth graders were more likely than seventh graders to report this (89% vs. 11%) ($p < .00$).

Frequency of Various Types of Bullying

Gossiping/rumors was the main bullying method used in the schools, with 60.7% reporting this type of bullying occurring "all of the time" or "most of the time." Two thirds of the students (66.8%) who reported that gossiping/rumors occurs "all of the time" or "most of the time" were girls. Teasing followed as the second main bullying method used, with almost half (48.3%) reporting this occurs "all of the time" or "most of the time." Threatening is the least used bullying method in the schools, as almost half (49.6%) of the students reported that it occurs either "a little of the time" or "none of the time."

Frequency of Observing a Kid Being Bullied at School

Only 16.3% of the respondents reported never seeing a kid being bullied in their school. While most students reported seeing a kid being bullied "a little of the time" (29.2%) or "some of the time" (30.0%), almost one quarter of the students (24.5%) reported seeing a kid being bullied either "most of the time" or "all of the time."

Last Time Saw Someone Being Bullied

Over half (55.5%) of the student respondents reported doing nothing the last time they saw someone being bullied at school. For those who did something the last time they saw someone being bullied at school, the most common response was to tell the bully to stop (18.8% of respondents gave that answer). Only 7 out of 100 respondents (7.2%) told an adult and the same proportion (7.0%) got friends to help the last time they saw someone being bullied at school ($p < .04$) (Figure 1).

Seventh and eighth graders were equally apathetic (51.1% of seventh graders and 59.9% of eighth graders reported doing nothing).

Reasons Respondents Gave for Doing Nothing

Of those who did nothing when they witnessed bullying, at least 4 of 10 (43.6%) gave, "It wasn't my business," as the reason. One in four (26.7%) said they did not intervene because they "didn't care" (Figure 2).

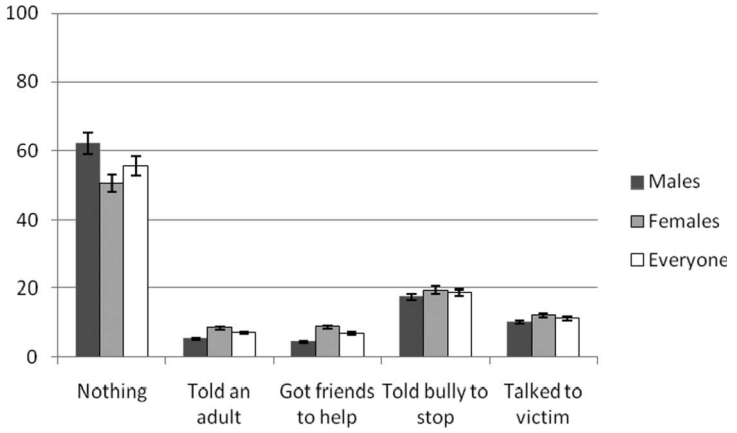

FIGURE 1 What did you do the last time you saw someone bullied at school?

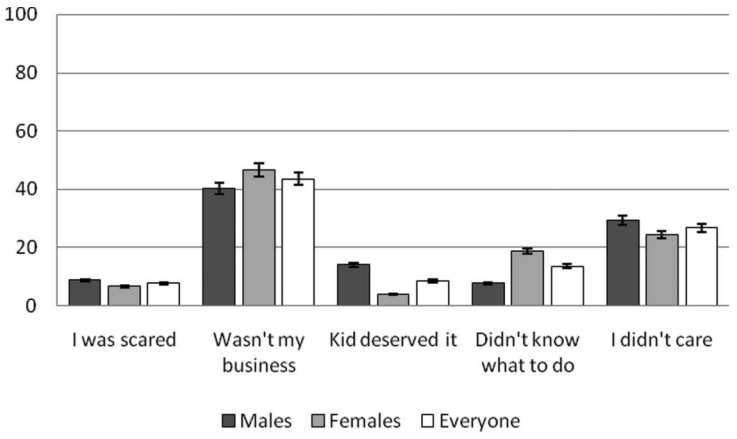

FIGURE 2 If you chose "Did nothing," why?

Of the students who reported they "didn't care," eighth graders were more likely than seventh graders to say so (31.2% vs. 21.2%) ($p < .03$), with eighth grade girls reporting this more frequently than seventh grade girls (32.0% vs. 14.3%) ($p < .01$).

Frequency of Having Been Bullied at School

Almost half of the student respondents (45.1%) reported having been bullied at least a little of the time. Girls were as likely as boys to have been bullied in school (45.9% vs. 44.0%) (Figure 3).

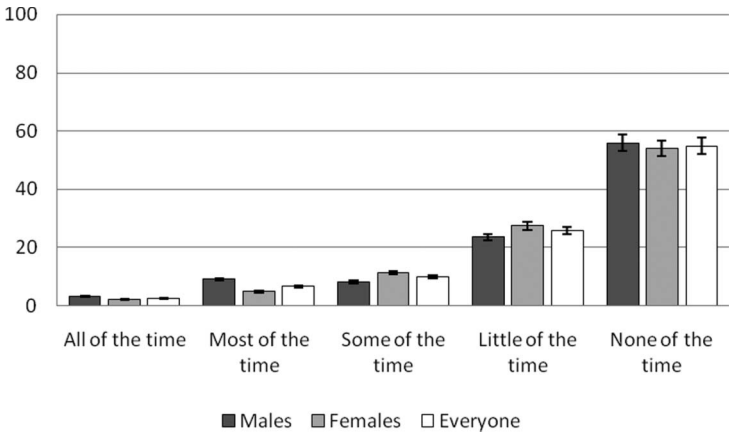

FIGURE 3 How often have you bullied in your school?

Actions Taken When Bullied at School

If they were bullied, girls were more likely than boys to "ignore the bully" (40.2% vs. 25.7%), while boys were more likely than girls to "push/hit the bully" (38.8% vs. 17.7%) ($p < .00$). Eighth grade girls were more likely than seventh grade girls to "push/hit the bully" (24.5% vs. 9.8%) ($p < .01$).

Frequency of Bullying Others at School

Over one out of three (38.5%) admitted they have bullied someone (37.2% of females, 40.2% of males). More seventh graders than eighth graders said they have bullied someone (43.9% vs. 33.2%) ($p < .01$).

Frequency of Different Types of Bullying

Teasing was the most common form of bullying that respondents themselves reported using, with 59.2% saying they personally tease at least a "little of the time," followed by doing the following at least a "little of the time": gossiping/rumors (47.6%), excluding (42.0%), hitting (34.3%), and threatening (29.3%).

Feelings of Safety at School

Overall, three out of four (75.4%) student respondents reported feeling "safe" or "very safe" in school, with girls reporting feeling safer at school than boys (81.7% vs. 66.7%) ($p < .00$). Both seventh and eighth graders felt similarly safe at school (78.2% vs. 72.8%).

Reasons for Feeling Unsafe at School

Boys more often reported physical safety (45.1%) as their primary concern compared with girls who reported other reasons (39.4%) ($p < .04$). Seventh and eighth graders, alike, reported physical safety (36.8% and 38.9%, respectively) and other reasons (38.4% and 36.2%, respectively) as their major concerns.

Frequency of Being the Victim of Cyberbullying

One in four students (27.9%) reported being a victim of cyberbullying at least a "little of the time."

Actions Taken When the Victim of Cyberbullying

Overall, students were more likely to ignore a cyberbully (30.9%) and least likely to ask a friend for help (5.2%); girls were more likely than boys to ignore or block a cyberbully (38.6% vs. 21.9%) while boys were more likely to do nothing (33.1% vs. 25.2) or cyberbully the bully (32.6% vs. 20.0%) ($p < .00$) (Figure 4).

Frequency of Cyberbullying Others

Out of every 10 students, between 1 and 2 (15.2%) admitted ever being a cyberbully. Eighth graders were more likely than seventh graders to report ever having cyberbullied someone else (18.0% vs. 12.4%) ($p < .06$).

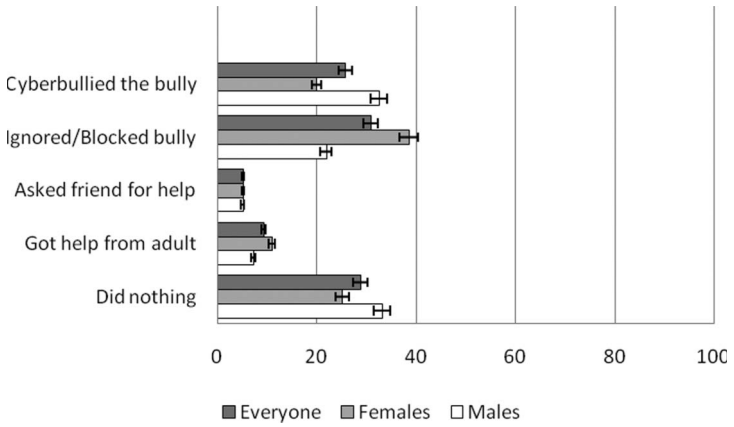

FIGURE 4 In school or out, if you have ever been a victim of a cyberbully, what did you do?

DISCUSSION

Significance of Findings

The Brown et al. (2005) bullying study found that only one-fourth of the 9- to 13- year-old respondents told an adult, and 20% did nothing, when they were the targets of bullying; two-thirds claimed they told an adult or tried to stop bullying, but 16% did nothing when they saw someone else being bullied (Brown et al., 2005). Our study also shows a concerning level of apathy toward bullying. Half the students who completed the Middle School Bullying Survey reported doing nothing the last time they saw someone being bullied at school; only 7% told an adult; and only 7% got friends to help when they saw bullying. Even though 75% said they felt safe in school, 80% reported bullying is a problem of some magnitude and one-third admitted having bullied someone. In contrast to other studies (Nansel et al., 2001; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Charach et al., 1995), our survey results indicated that girls are just as likely as boys to have been bullied themselves and to bully others.

As one-quarter of the students in our study reported being a victim of cyberbullying at least a "little of the time" and 15% admitted ever being a cyberbully, the incidence of online harassment is worthy of further investigation given electronic media's increasing popularity among this age cohort. On a positive note, a 2006 study showed that 68% of 10- to 17-year-olds who experienced Internet harrassment "spoke up" and told a friend, parent, or other authority figure about the incident (Ybarra et al., 2006). That moment of disclosure provides an opportunity for parents, teachers, and school professionals to work with young people to help prevent a future bullying event. Our study, moreover, concluded that indirect types of bullying—gossiping, rumors, excluding, and teasing—are more prevalent than direct types of bullying like hitting or threatening. School psychologists, in particular, can play a central role in identifying the sources of, and most effective interventions for, these subtler versions of bullying (Furlong et al., 2003).

Bullying Education Resources

One third of students in the Brown et al. study (2005) admitted they did not know the best way to stop bullying (Brown et al., 2005). This points to the need for education in this area. Knowing the characteristics of bullying, bullies, and victims, such as from the results of our Middle School Bullying Survey, may help educators focus and customize anti-bullying programs. Anti-bullying intervention strategies should involve youth in all stages of discussions and activities related to bullying (Olweus, 1994), as conducting this survey study and writing this article offered. Based on the results of this study, the school-age authors launched a new website for kids, www.projectbully.com.

Some success at reducing bullying (measured scientifically, with control groups, blind assessments, and repeated measures) has been attained with a structured curriculum, delivered by well-trained teachers to heterogeneous groups of school students via discussions, stories, role-plays, and other active learning methods. Among these successes are the Peacemakers' Program, S.S. Grin, Steps to Respect, Resolving Conflict Creatively, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Berger, 2007).

Anti-Bullying Bill Passed by Florida House, April 2007

While writing this article, HB 575, The Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up For All Students Act, known as the "Anti-Bullying Bill," passed in the Florida House on April 24, 2007. The bill provides a model policy to be enacted in all school districts throughout Florida by prohibiting bullying and harassment against any student or employee of a public K–12 education institution. It establishes a framework for students, teachers, and parents to communicate with each other about incidents of bullying (Anti-Bullying Bill, 2007).

Study Limitations

Our Middle School Bullying Survey was based on self-reported data, and as such, students may have over- or under-reported behaviors to cast themselves in the best light (or whatever light they wanted us to see). The generalizability of the survey results to the wider population of seventh and eighth graders is not possible because: (a) the study was descriptive in nature and relied on a single instrument whose reliability and validity has not yet been tested; (b) respondents were not randomly selected; (c) results were based solely on forms that were returned on a voluntary basis; and (d) survey forms completed improperly were not included in the analysis (e.g., checking two boxes instead of one).

In April 2007, researchers designed a reliable and valid instrument for the measurement of bullying and victimization—the Peer Interactions in Primary School (PIPS) Questionnaire. While this measure is meant for elementary, not middle, school use, this tool could be used in the design and evaluation of school-based bullying and victimization interventions in future studies (Tarshis & Huffman, 2007). Using principal components analysis, Mynard and Joseph (2000) developed a multidimensional psychometric scale and identified four main factors—physical victimization, verbal victimization, social manipulation, and attacks on property—to construct subscales with satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity with self-reports of being bullied (Mynard & Joseph, 2000). The Reynolds Bully Victimization Scale for Schools™ is another self-report, standardized instrument to assess

bullying behavior and bully-victimization experiences in children and adolescents.

Future Waves of Survey Administration

While our Middle School Bullying Survey had its limitations, including that 400 of the 587 total surveys represented only one of the four participating schools, it served as a pilot test for expanding the scope of its administration in 2007 in the same schools represented in this study, as well as in additional schools located in Durham, North Carolina; Ireland; the United Kingdom; and Canada. As of June 2007, we completed the 2007 survey administration in five United States-based schools (of which four are from the same participating schools in the 2006 study reported here). Research from surveys conducted in 2007 has been published (Pergolizzi et al., 2009). With more schools and a larger sample size represented in future studies, we hope to be able to make some statistical projections and include inter- and intra-school analyses that might point to the role of school characteristics (e.g., urban/suburban/rural; racial/ethnic makeup; school size) in bullying rates, types, and interventions. We also look forward to making cross-year comparisons.

CONCLUSIONS

Raising awareness of bullying and its potentially devastating effects for both victims and perpetrators is sorely needed. The results of our 2006 Middle School Bullying Survey were an impetus for the four participating schools to begin instituting anti-bullying interventions. As more schools join in similar research efforts, awareness will increase and anti-bullying interventions can be customized to the needs and profiles of each school. These interventions need to sensitize youth to the problems of bullying; help students take personal and collective responsibility in bullying incidents; revisit the concepts of empathy and courage; empower the "silent majority" of students who witness bullying incidents to take a stand and safely intervene; and advise students on bully prevention strategies (Child Abuse Prevention Services, 2006). Efforts such as these will help add to the synergistic anti-bullying advocacy movement that led Florida to pass a state-level Anti-bullying Bill in April 2007. Hopefully over time the messages that bullying is "uncool," and that intervening in a bullying event is "cool," will become the overriding accepted norm across all sectors of society.

Research is needed to test the psychometric properties of the CAPS Middle School Bullying Survey (ideally in English and Spanish); further explore the incidence and effects of cyberbullying; examine the role of school differences on bullying; and study gender differences in bullying and how gender relates to different types of bullying.

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