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The prevalence, nature and psychological correlates of bullying in Irish prisons

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Purpose. The objectives of the study were to analyse the prevalence and nature of bullying reported among a representative sample of prisoners in Irish custodial institutions, to identify potential correlates of bullying behaviour and vulnerability to victimization, and to assess the psychological impact of the experience of bullying.

Methods. The sample was selected from seven separate custodial institutions and consisted of 213 male and 19 female inmates. In a structured interview, prisoners were asked to report their experience of bullying and were categorized as 'pure bullies', 'bully-victims', 'pure victims' or 'not involved'. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ, short version) was used to assess the psychological well-being of the interviewees.

Results. The level of victimization was very high, with almost half of the interviewees reporting at least one type of victimization. Slightly over a quarter reported bullying another inmate, although the majority of these had themselves been victimized. Bullying took many forms but the most common were verbal abuse, theft and assault with and without an implement. Females reported engaging in bullying more frequently than males, especially in less direct forms. Victims (including bully-victims) had significantly higher GHQ scores, indicating greater psychological distress than those not bullied. 'Pure victims' were older than other inmates and had entered the prison system at an older age.

Conclusion. Definitional differences make cross-national comparisons difficult but bullying in Ireland shows many of the same characteristics as reported in UK studies. The phenomenon of older victims may be a distinctive feature. The category of 'pure bully' is a useful one to include in future research.

There is a relatively limited amount of psychological research on the topic of prison bullying and much of the work is basic in its nature, attempting to address issues of definition (Connell & Farrington, 1996). The problem with defining bullying is reflected in the numerous ways it is operationalized. From the literature on school-children, bullying is seen to be a subset of aggressive behaviour in which there is an imbalance of power, intention to cause fear, distress or harm to the victim and the aggressive act is repeated over time (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1994). In the prison

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context, Tattum and Herdman (1995) defined bullying as a motivation to hurt, threaten or frighten someone. But this may underrate the financial or material element in much bullying. Many approaches divide the behaviour into physical, verbal and psychological aspects, but research has shown that not all bullying involves these three aspects.

Ireland (1999) has noted that one way in which researchers try to avoid definitional problems in bullying research is to present respondents with a definition of the phenomenon. The difficulty is that such a definition may not be compatible with people's own perceptions or definitions of the behaviour (Power, Dyson, & Wozniak, 1997). Connell and Farrington (1997), in their definition, proposed that bullying typically occurred several times, was unprovoked by the victim, involved the same people and took place in the context of a power imbalance. However, the same authors elsewhere (Connell & Farrington, 1996) pointed out that many prisoners did not perceive certain kinds of behaviour as falling into the sphere of bullying.

Varieties of bullying behaviour

The most direct form of bullying is physical and includes beating, kicking, assault, sexual assault and threats of violence. Cooley (1993) administered a criminal victimization survey to a group of male prisoners. Participants reported that being physically assaulted (62%) was the main type of personal victimization, followed by being threatened with assault (29%).

Alongside the direct physical aspect of bullying was property offence victimization. Power *et al.* (1997) found that the majority of inmates rated taxing (threatening individuals for material gain) to be the most prevalent form of bullying. Twenty per cent in Cooley's sample reported multiple property victimization. This involved another inmate entering the victim's cell and, without the victim's consent, removing personal property, or 'cell theft'.

Verbal forms of victimization were also prevalent, including the spreading of untrue rumours and name-calling (Power *et al.*, 1997). Ireland and Archer (1996) found that the main forms of bullying, aside from physical attacks, taking things and threats, were 'verbal', 'intimidation', 'gossip-spread rumours', and 'ostracising'. Results also showed that women reported using more of these indirect forms of bullying than men. Shine and Wilson (1988) interviewed prisoners and staff in a prison unit. In their study, bullying mainly involved initiation into the unit in the form of taunts and threats, sometimes escalating to acts of violence. Other behaviours they observed included the demanding of canteen goods as 'protection', sex offenders being forced to pay goods in order for the nature of their offence to be kept secret, and the loaning of goods, followed by demands for 'payment with interest'.

In summary, it is clear that bullying in prisons is extremely diverse and comprises both the physically threatening aspect, with prisoners fearing for their immediate physical safety, as well as psychologically damaging name-calling, and rumour-spreading, and finally a materially driven 'goods and money' quasi-business side.

Incidence and prevalence of bullying

In a study conducted by O'Donnell and Edgar (1998), it was found that over two-thirds of young offenders and more than half of adult inmates felt that bullying was a serious problem in prisons and young offender institutions. In the young offender institutions surveyed, one in three of those questioned had been assaulted and almost half had

been threatened with violence. A fifth of the adult prisoners had been assaulted and a quarter threatened with violence. One-half of the young offenders had received hurtful insults, as had one-quarter of the adults. A quarter of young offenders and one in three adults had suffered cell theft.

These findings were supported by Power *et al*. (1997), who found that 81% of inmates felt that bullying was a problem in Scottish young offender institutions in general. Of their sample, 45% reported involvement in bullying behaviour. Beck (1992) reported that 20% had bullied others in the past month and 30% said they had been victims. In a later study carried out in Britain by Beck (1994), 21% of prisoners said that they had been victimized in their current institution, while 8% said that they had bullied others. Ireland and Archer (1996) found lower levels occurring, with 5.8% of inmates admitting to being bullies while 13.8% of inmates admitted to being victims.

Psychological consequences of bullying

Existing school research suggests that bullying is harmful to both bullies and especially to victims (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994). Bullying is associated with poorer psychological well-being, which continues into adulthood. Children who are bullied at school risk continuing misery, lack of confidence, low self-esteem and problems in forming stable and trusting relationships (Olweus, 1994). Rigby (1996) found that aggressive victimization leads to impairment in social functioning, anxiety and depression. The self-deprecation, guilt, shame, learned helplessness and depression that victims suffer (Greenbaum, Turner, & Stephens, 1989) constrict their freedom and diminish their quality of life.

In the prison context, McCorkle (1993) found that the strongest predictor of an inmate's mental health was the level of fear regarding other prisoners. King (1991) found that the victimized inmate suffered from a host of psychophysiological disturbances such as depressed mood, anxiety, low energy levels and nervousness. The negative effects of bullying on its victims can be intense and long-lasting and have been implicated as contributory factors in the suicide of young offenders (Bailey, 1993). Liebling and Krarup (1992), as part of their suicide investigations, found that over one-quarter of suicide attempts were related to pressures from other prisoners.

In this paper, bullying in Irish prisons is assessed. The aim of the research was to provide basic data about the frequency and nature of bullying among a representative sample of prisoners as well as to test certain hypotheses about bullying. Predictions based on the literature were that females would report less bullying overall as well as less direct forms of bullying than males. It was also expected that comparing the characteristics of bullies and victims, victims would be younger and therefore more vulnerable in a prison situation than bullies. Finally it was anticipated that both bullies and victims would have poorer psychological well-being than those not involved in bullying in any way.

Method

Profile of prisoner sample

In the study, only sentenced prisoners were included in the sample, as it was felt that they would have a better insight into the prison environment than remand prisoners. In total, 232 prisoners participated in the study. The mean age of the male prisoners in

this study (N=213) was 26 years (median=23, SD=9.1). The youngest male prisoner was aged 16 years and the oldest was 60 years. The mean age of the female prisoners (N=19) was 25 years (median=23, SD=8.6). The youngest female prisoner was aged 17 years and the oldest was 57 years.

The prisoners had on average six siblings (SD=3.5). The average age for leaving school was 14.5 years (SD=2.0). Only one prisoner had completed his schooling to the Irish Leaving Certificate level and attended college. Six of the participants had never attended school. Of the entire sample, 19.6% of inmates had been in prison for less than 1 year, 20.4% for more than 1 year and less than 2 years, 53.8% for more than 2 years and less than 10 years, and 6.2% for 10 years or more. The offences for which the prisoners were serving their sentences were very diverse and included murder, rape and kidnapping at the more extreme end of a seriousness continuum, to criminal damage and burglary. The modal offences were assault, including assault on a police officer (14.5%), drug-related offences (12.9%), and arson (11.2%).

Sampling procedure

The sampling method adopted followed O'Mahony's (1997) quasi-random method, which was to interview a systematic random sample of each chosen prison population. The aim was to orally administer questionnaires to prisoners. The sample participants were selected from a list of all prisoners by taking every fifth case starting from a randomly selected small number. If a remand prisoner was selected from the list, he/she was not interviewed and the next prisoner was chosen from the list. Because of the sensitivity surrounding the area of bullying, the personal nature of the questions asked of the prisoners, and the lack of any immediate benefits for participants, refusals were expected but in fact these were below 15% of those asked in any prison. In order to achieve valid and representative data of the prison population, the final selection of prisons comprised two young offender institutions, one female prison, two committal adult prisons, one adult detention centre and one detention centre for adult and juvenile offenders. Of Ireland's ten 'closed' custodial prisons, only three were not included in the sample—one was a unit containing mainly sex offenders which had an intensive psychological assessment programme ongoing at the time, the second was a high security jail containing 'political' or 'subversive' prisoners convicted in the Special Criminal Court, and the third was not included because of time and organizational pressure surrounding the research.

Measures

Discussion meetings were held with the head of the Psychological Service at the Department of Justice in Ireland and the governors of a number of prisons, and these were followed by a pilot study with nine prisoners in order to examine the suitability of questionnaire items being used in a structured interview. A questionnaire was constructed to collect data on the prevalence, nature and circumstances of bullying, demographic and sentencing information, as well as psychological data. The questionnaire was composed of a number of sections. Section 1 sought to gather information on the following demographic and personal variables: age, height, weight, pre-prison residence, siblings in family, birth order, parents' marital status, residence, urban/rural area, education and substance abuse. Section 2 included the following prison variables: date of entry into prison, entrance age into prison, sentence length, length of sentence served, previous sentences, crime committed, whether on protection, reasons for

being on protection and expected release date. Section 3 focused on psychological health and included the short form of the Questionnaire on General Health (GHQ-12; Goldberg, 1992). This was selected as a measure of psychological distress among the participants. The GHQ is a standardized and widely-used method of assessing levels of psychological well-being. It is a 12-item self-report questionnaire. Each of the 12 items asks whether the respondent has experienced a particular symptom or item of behaviour recently, using a 4-point scale: 'less than usual', 'same as usual', 'rather more than usual' or 'much more than usual'.

Section 4 contained five questions; two that were answered in open-ended format, two that were answered based on a Likert scale and one that required answering in a check format. Questions 2 and 3 required participants to indicate the frequency of bullying from two predetermined lists: (a) types of bullying they had seen happen to others in prison and (b) types of bullying they had experienced themselves. The lists of bullying behaviours ranged from the least direct (e.g. name-calling) to the most direct (e.g. sexual assault), each one translated into a 5-point Likert item with points ranging from 1 (never occurred), 2 (seldom occurred), 3 (sometimes occurred), 4 (often occurred) to 5 (very often occurred). The fifth section contained 27 personal questions that examined the prevalence and frequency of bullying in prison and prisoners' experience of bullying in prison. This section in the questionnaire was adapted from questionnaires designed by other researchers in the area of prison bullying (e.g. Connell & Farrington, 1996; Ireland & Archer, 1996; Power *et al.*, 1997). A range of questions was used to obtain general estimates on the extent, frequency and severity of bullying in Irish prisons. Questions were both closed and open-ended.

Procedure

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The researcher was alone in the room with the participant. A prison officer who communicated the purpose of the study to each participant by letter escorted each prisoner to the room. Absolute confidentiality could not be assured, since the interviewees were told that a medical officer would have to be informed should they reveal a desire to hurt themselves in the course of the interview. Each interview began with a short introduction. Following the interview, the participants were asked if they had any questions and a discussion time made available.

Results

Prevalence of bullying behaviour

For the purposes of this study, the extent of bullying was measured using the number of inmates who reported themselves as being involved in bullying behaviour (data from section 5 of the questionnaire). Overall, 57% of inmates questioned were involved in bullying in the prisons in some way, either engaging in it or experiencing it. Using the categorization developed by Ireland (see Ireland, 1999), 9.5% pure bullies (PBs: had bullied others but did not experience bullying by others) were identified, as were 31% pure victims (PVs: had experienced victimization by bullies but did not bully others) and 15.9% bully-victims (BVs: had bullied others and had experienced victimization by bullies themselves). In all, 25.4% of inmates (PBs and BVs) reported bullying others, while 47% (PVs and BVs) reported that they had been bullied. Of the entire sample, 43% neither bullied others nor had experienced bullying and were classed as NIs (not

involved). Of the 19 female prisoners, 36.8% admitted to being victims (PVs and BVs) compared with 47.9% of all males. However, 42.1% of female inmates admitted to being bullies (PBs and BVs) compared with 23.9% of male prisoners.

All prisoners were asked to estimate how often they had witnessed incidents of bullying (section 4 of the questionnaire). Bullies were asked how often they had bullied other prisoners and self-reported victims were asked how often they had been bullied. Over half (53.4%) stated that they had seen bullying being carried out 'most days' or 'every day'. Of victims of bullying (PVs and BVs), 33.1% reported that they had been bullied by other inmates 'most days' or 'every day' during their present sentence and in their current prison. Of the bullies (PBs and BVs), 28.8% reported bullying other inmates 'most days' or 'every day'.

Types of bullying in Irish prisons

Types of bullying were examined by asking prisoners to rate 19 forms of bullying on a scale running from 1 (never) to 5 (very often), that they had seen. Rumour-spreading was rated as most prevalent by 48.3% of the sample. Other types of bullying believed to be frequently seen in prison were name-calling (47.4%), practical jokes (40.9%), verbal threats (38.8%), teasing (35.3%) and theft (34.5%).

The responses of male and female prisoners with regard to their perception of the prevalence of these 19 forms of bullying were assessed. The four types in which there was more than a difference of one on the Likert scale of perceived prevalence were threats with a weapon (reported as more prevalent by males) and ignoring, vandalism of goods and theft (reported as more prevalent by females).

The types of bullying reported demonstrate that a variety of behaviours are involved and there is evidence for suggesting that physical, verbal and psychological bullying all occur within the prison environment. Participants' perceptions of types of bullying in prison were also obtained through an open-ended question 'Describe the type of bullying that takes place in as much detail as possible'. Out of the 83 types of bullying described, seven categories were identified. The main categories arising were 'robbery' (18.7%), 'verbal abuse' (18%), 'assault with a weapon' (17.4%), 'emotional abuse' (14.1%), 'physical abuse' (13.5%), 'assault without a weapon' (10.1%) and 'exploitation' (10.1%).

Victims identified 50 different ways in which they were bullied, which were interpreted and broken down into eight possible groups. The most common ways in which victims stated they were bullied were 'verbal abuse' (30.4%) and 'emotional abuse' (30.4%). Other suggestions offered by victims included 'assault without a weapon' (16.2%), 'assault with a weapon' (6.8%), 'physical abuse' (4.7%), 'taunting' (4.7%), 'robbery' (4.7%) and 'exploitation' (2.0%).

Bullies identified 31 ways in which they bully other prisoners. These were interpreted and broken down into six possible groups. The most common style reported by bullies was 'emotional abuse' of victims (32.9%), followed by 'verbal abuse' (31.6%). Other ways in which bullies victimized fellow prisoners included 'assault without a weapon' (26.6%), 'assault with a weapon' (6.3%), 'exploitation' (1.3%) and 'robbery' (1.3%).

Approximately one-quarter of victims reported being bullied when they first arrived in prison (this figure includes BVs). Of the bullies, only 22% stated that they had begun to bully in the current prison sentence. Self-reported bullies were also asked if they victimized the same prisoners and only 17 (29% of all bullies) said they did. Forty

(66.7%) PVs and 20 (33.3%) BVs reported knowing their bully beforehand (35.2% of males and 15.8% of females). While 33.6% of all victims (PVs and BVs) reported knowing their bully beforehand, only 15.1% of all bullies (PBs and BVs) admitted to knowing a prisoner before bullying him/her.

Differences between bullying groups

Differences between the bullying groups (PB, PV, BV, NI) in areas such as demography and prison-entry variables were examined. The percentages of those in different bullying groups among older and younger prisoners were also contrasted. The sample was split into a younger age group (21 years of age and younger—36.6% of all prisoners) and an older group (over 22 years of age—63.4%). An identical proportion of both made up the NI group of 43.5%. Among the older prisoners, 15.0% were BVs, 7.5% were PBs and 34.0% were PVs. The corresponding figures for the younger prisoners were 17.6%, 12.9% and 25.9%. Significant age differences between the groups were found when the means were compared ($F(3,228)=4.20$, $p=.006$). A *post hoc* Student-Newman-Keuls (SNK) test revealed that PVs ($M=29.0$, SD=11.1) were significantly older than the three other groups (BV mean=23.7, SD=6.0; PB mean=23.2, SD=6.1; NI mean=25.8, SD=8.5).

There were significant differences between prisoners' mean school-leaving ages among the bullying groups ($F(3,222)=3.49$, $p=.017$). A *post hoc* SNK test revealed that BVs ($M=13.6$, SD=1.9) were significantly younger when leaving school than PBs ($M=14.0$, SD=2.0), PVs ($M=14.6$, SD=1.8) and NIs ($M=14.7$, SD=2.0). The average age that a prisoner entered into prison was also significantly associated with bullying group ($F(3,228)=3.93$, $p=.009$). Results from the *post hoc* test revealed that PVs ($M=27.4$, SD=10.5) entered prison at an older age compared with the other groups (BV mean=22.3, SD=5.5; PB mean=22.2, SD=6.0; NI mean=24.8, SD=8.4). The number of previous sentences served differed among the four groups (PB, PV, BV and NI), ($F(3,228)=4.14$, $p=.007$). A *post hoc* test revealed that BVs ($M=4.5$, SD=6.4) had served more previous sentences than PBs ($M=2.2$, SD=2.4), PVs ($M=2.2$, SD=4.6) and NIs ($M=1.8$, SD=2.4).

The levels of school-bullying experienced by the members of the four different bully groups were also compared. Of the entire sample, 28.9% prisoners acknowledged an experience of school bullying and of those, 46.3% participants stated they had been bullies, 47.8% victims and 5.9% bully-victims in school. BVs were more likely to have had previous experience of bullying in school compared to PBs, PVs and NIs (45.9% vs. 31.8%, 29.2% and 21.8%, Pearson's $\chi^2(3)=7.81$, $p=.05$).

The average length of time spent in prison up to the time of interview by members of the groups was also compared. Significant differences between the groups (PB, PV, BV and NI) were found when the means were compared. Victims (PVs and BVs) had spent a greater total amount of time in prison than those who had never been victimized ($t=1.99$, $p=.05$, Ms=20.8 months, SD=27.2, and 14.6 months, SD=20.1, respectively). Significant differences between bullies (PBs and BVs) and those who had never bullied (PVs and NIs) were not found ($t=0.03$, $p=.98$, Ms=17.4 months, SD=16.0, and 17.5 months, SD=25.9, respectively) and the data suggest that bullies had not spent a different length of time in prison compared with non-bullies.

Significant differences between the bullying categories were not found when potentially predictive variables like height ($F(3,224)=.25$, $p=.86$), weight ($F(3,221)=.30$, $p=.82$), number of children in family ($F(3,228)=.83$, $p=.48$), birth

order in family ($F(3,228)=1.02$, $p=.39$), sentence length ($F(3,224)=.73$, $p=.53$), non-custodial residential status ($\chi^2(12)=13.08$, $p=.36$), and substance abuse ($\chi^2(3)=7.56$, $p=.06$) were examined (data from sections 1 and 2 of the questionnaire).

Psychological consequences of bullying behaviour

The GHQ-12 was used to check whether bullying had psychological consequences for those involved in the behaviour. A threshold score of 3 was used for the present sample, as this is consistent with thresholds used in previous research involving the GHQ-12 (Goldberg & Williams, 1991). This means that respondents rate some negative event in their lives occurring rather more or much more commonly (or some positive event less or much less commonly) on at least three of the 12 items. The use of a threshold subdivided the scores into those considered 'cases' of psychological disorders and those that are not.

Out of the total sample, 18.2% of prisoners scored above the threshold. Out of the adult prisoners, 18.4% scored above the threshold, and this compares with 17.6% of the juvenile group. When the sample is further broken down into bully groups, the PBs and NIs had the best psychological health, with only 9% and 9.9%, respectively, scoring above the threshold. In contrast, among the BVs and PVs, 32.4% and 25.0%, respectively, presented scores above the threshold.

Differences in GHQ scores (as opposed to the categories 'above threshold' and 'below threshold') among the four bully groups were also compared using a one-way analysis of variance and a significant interaction was recorded ($F(3,228)=3.37$, $p=.012$). The mean score for BVs was 1.39 (SD=.7) and for PVs was 1.41 (SD=.6). In contrast, the mean scores for those groups whose members had not been bullied was substantially lower at 1.12 for PBs (SD=.3) and 1.16 for NIs (SD=.6). These figures (confirmed by a *post hoc* SNK test) suggest that higher GHQ scores (and poorer psychological health) are associated with membership of one of the two victimized groups (BVs and PVs) but not the non-victimized groups (NIs and PBs). In contrast, the mean scores of the two groups engaging in bullying (PBs and BVs) did not differ significantly from the two non-bullying groups (PVs and NIs).

Victimization was associated with poorer psychological well-being, since victims of bullying have significantly higher GHQ scores than non-victims. Bullying in turn is not associated with either poorer or better psychological health, since bullies do not differ either significantly or substantially from non-bullies. Finally, bullying others does not appear to lessen the effects of victimization, since the mean GHQ score for BVs is almost identical to that of PVs.

Discussion

The findings confirm that bullying is a widespread problem in Irish prisons. But a key question is not whether, but to what degree, bullying is a problem in one jurisdiction relative to others. Unfortunately the problems noted at the beginning of the article in defining bullying have proved to be important, since as Ireland (1999) noted, the way in which bullying is defined may at least partly determine its recorded frequency. The rate of victimization found here (if one combines both BVs and PVs) is 47%, which is higher than those reported in some other studies cited in the Introduction. Along with almost half who reported being victimized by bullies, about a quarter (25.4%) admitted to bullying others. One might conclude, therefore, that bullying is more prevalent in the prisons sampled in this study than in many other studies (and by corollary that

Irish prisons have more incidents of bullying that those in the UK). However, the figures are reasonably similar to Ireland's (1999) study of adult and youth prisoners in the UK, where 51.8% of inmates reported experiencing at least one type of 'bullying' interaction in the very recent past—her research also used the checklist of behaviours and experiences method. Thus disparities in definition make direct comparisons difficult and one can merely conclude that in using an inclusive concept of bullying, cases of bullying in Irish prisons are frequent and varied.

The categories developed by Ireland (1999), especially including the notion of BV (bully-victim) appear to be helpful in understanding the phenomenon. Although the results here do not coincide with her finding that the BV group was modal (the NIs were the most common category in this study at 43%), nonetheless at 15.9%, BVs were clearly not an insignificant category. Assuming that prisoners were reporting their behaviour and experiences honestly (although this may be a naïve assumption), then the pattern appeared to indicate a smaller proportion of prisoners victimizing a much larger group; some of the victimizers in turn being victimized by a core group of pure bullies.

Indirect forms of bullying were clearly prevalent and among the most frequent were rumour-spreading, name-calling and teasing. As in other studies, indirect bullying was more likely to be admitted by females and this contributed to the higher overall rate of female bullying in comparison to male. Victimization was more likely to be reported by males. Alongside the indirect forms of bullying were more direct and physically threatening ones involving assault, including with a weapon (and this was more prevalent among males). Given the small size of the female subsample of prisoners in this study, one must be cautious about drawing very rigid conclusions about gender differences.

A surprising finding emerged with regard to the ages of different bullying groups (looking at actual ages rather than comparing categories of 'older' and 'younger'). It had been predicted that those most at risk of victimization would be younger but in fact PVs (pure victims) were significantly older than the three other groups. PVs also entered prison at a significantly older age than the other groups. One might speculate that this points to a different type of vulnerability, based on lack of early prison experience, whereby offenders who enter prison at an older age have not been socialized into prison life and its culture and are more exposed than those who are 'prison-smart'. Experience *per se* is not the issue, since victims (including PVs and BVs) had actually spent longer on average in prison—but their prison experiences had begun at a later age.

It had been predicted that both bullies and victims would show poorer psychological well-being than those not involved. This pattern was confirmed only for victims, with significantly greater GHQ scores recorded for PVs and BVs. However, the GHQ scores of those who had admitted bullying others were no greater than the rest of the sample. Thus, victims did suffer psychological distress but there is no evidence that bullies did.

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