

Bullying of young people: Recent Research in England and Scotland

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Summary

The Department for Education (DfE) published [Bullying: evidence from the second longitudinal study of young people in England](#) in November 2015, and Respect Me (Scotland's anti-bullying service) published [Bullying in Scotland](#) in 2014. The first provides up to date data on prevalence, types of bullying and characteristics of those bullied in England whilst the second provides a more holistic picture of prevalence allied to coping strategies, and bullying across different contexts, especially on and off line. These reports are considered in the context of wider international work on bullying and its impact including an increasingly public health focus in the United States of America and asks whether such a policy focus would also be helpful in England.

This briefing will be of interest to Members and local authority officers with responsibility for school organisation and effectiveness, youth and community services and public health. School staff and governors will also find the briefing of interest.

Background

[Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview](#) which was published by Unicef in April 2013 provided a comparative picture of bullying across developed countries (see 'Related Briefing'). The review found that the great majority of developed countries were seeing a decline in the percentage of children who reported being involved in fighting and being bullied, with the United Kingdom in a middle ranked position amongst the 29 nations surveyed. The data that the Unicef report was based on was generated before 2011, and it therefore reflected the position in schools in England prior to the large scale changes in school organisation since 2010.

The Scottish government took an holistic approach in 2010 when publishing: [A National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People](#), promising to develop the work of the Scottish Anti-Bullying Steering Group, following consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. This resulted in a "strong consensus around what our approach to anti-bullying for Scotland's children and young people should be; what our roles and responsibilities are; and how we can all contribute to this." It set out the framework for policy and practice across Scotland's local authorities, schools and other organisations.

Briefing in full

Research Prior to 2014

A series of annual confidential online surveys to gather quantitative information on the views and experiences of children and young people known as 'Tellus' was originally commissioned by the

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Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 2006 and later taken over by OSFTED. It provided the underpinning data for one of the Labour Government's national indicators (NI 69 Percentage of children who have experienced bullying) now no longer used, and provided data which was used in a variety of survey and comparative contexts.

The Red Balloon Learner Centre Group, a charity set up specifically to help severely bullied children who are out of school and missing education, felt that research in the UK had largely focused on the prevalence of bullying, and there had been little work done to measure its impact in terms of school absence in particular. It therefore commissioned the National Centre for Social Research to produce a report entitled [Estimating the prevalence of young people absent from school due to bullying](#) which was published in May 2011. This report said that Bullying was the fifth most common reason given by parents for absence from school and the third most common reason given for parents deciding to educate their children at home. The report estimated that 16,493 young people aged 11-15 were absent from state school, where bullying is the main reason for absence, and for a further 77,950 young people aged 11-15 bullying is a reason given for absence alongside other reasons. The report also noted that 83% of parents citing bullying as a reason for absence also noted health reasons, and concluded that the incidence of bullying is considerable higher than was previously thought.

[Bullying victimisation and risk of self-harm in early adolescence: longitudinal cohort study](#) published in the British Medical Journal in 2012 backed up the link between bullying and health suggesting that frequent bullying in childhood increases the likelihood of self-harming in early adolescence. It recommended a focus on helping bullied children to cope more appropriately with their distress, and that children with additional mental health problems, those that have been maltreated by an adult and/ those with a family history of attempted/completed suicide should be targeted for support.

OFSTED produced [No Place for Bullying](#) in June 2012. It surveyed bullying in a sample of primary and secondary schools and found that whilst they all had a written behaviour policy and an anti-bullying policy, less than a quarter saw bullying as part of a wider perspective on behaviour and had combined the two. Whilst few schools had a clear stance on the use of language or the boundaries between banter and behaviour that makes people feel threatened or hurt, the vast majority of pupils thought that bullying would stop if it was reported to an adult in the school. The OFSTED report found that where staff were trained on bullying it was effective in helping them to develop awareness and tackle this issue, but they also found that in many schools it was absent.

Inspectors found a range of weaknesses in how schools recorded bullying incidents undermining the schools' ability to use this information to shape future actions. The quality of information received by Governors was closely related to the quality of the school's recording and analysis of bullying incidents with reports to governors often including little analysis. Just over half the schools in the OFSTED survey had thought about addressing bullying through the curriculum. This might be through helping pupils to understand difference and diversity and develop positive values and behaviours, or through specifically focusing on different aspects of bullying, including homophobia and racism or cyberbullying. OFSTED remarked that disability was seldom covered well.

The second longitudinal study of young people in England (LSYPE2)

The second longitudinal study of young people in England (LSYPE2) published in November 2015 is a Department for Education (DfE) research study which started in 2013 and which builds on the first longitudinal study of young people in England (LSYPE) which ran from 2004 to 2010 and which is now being continued by the Institute of Education in London. LSYPE2 is following young people from the age of 13/14 to 19/20 and is about transitions from school to training, employment and career paths.

[Bullying: evidence from the second longitudinal study of young people in England](#) is focused on students' reported experience of bullying gathered as part of the larger research project. It fills a gap in reporting on this topic since the demise of the national indicator set, and supports the general conclusion of the Unicef report that bullying is declining in schools in England as well as providing some interesting and more up to date detail of the experiences of children and young people. 11,166 young people in the second wave cohort were interviewed in Y10 (14 to 15 year olds) in 2014. They had also been interviewed in Y9 (13 to 14 year olds) during 2013, and the report therefore compares their Y10 responses on bullying with their Y9 responses. It also compares their responses in Y10 to the responses of the first wave cohort when in Y10 collected in 2005. A two-stage sampling process (firstly of schools and then of pupils in those schools) was designed to ensure wide coverage of young people's experiences.

Bullying remains an important issue. The Mail online reported [1,000 bullied pupils have to move schools every month](#) (November 2015). But overall, a significantly smaller proportion of year 10 students in 2014 said that they had been bullied in the last 12 months when compared with the equivalent age group in 2005. This is also the case when compared with their own responses when they were in year 9. According to this survey 37% of young people had experienced one or more of these types of bullying compared to 41% in 2005. If we don't include cyberbullying, this percentage drops to 36%. The most significant decrease in bullying is in both threats of violence and actual violence. Threats of violence used to affect 1 in 5 young people in 2005, and affected closer to 1 in 7 in 2014.

Name calling remains the most common type of bullying, affecting around 1 in 5 young people with social exclusion next, closely followed by threats of violence. Cyberbullying was asked about for the first time in 2014, and just over 1 in 10 young people said they had experienced this in the last 12 months. Daily bullying affects around 6 % of young people, and weekly, fortnightly or monthly bullying affects a further 7%. Eleven per cent of young people say they experience bullying less frequently than once a month, and a further 5% say that this varies.

Bullying remains an issue for schools. When the survey asked where bullying takes place, the majority of young people reported most types of bullying as more likely to happen in school with threats of violence (48%) and actual violence (56%) the categories with the highest incidence reported as entirely occurring in school. Cyberbullying was the exception that young people reported as happening mostly outside of school. Eleven per cent of young people said that they had experienced cyberbullying by phone or over the internet. Seven per cent of young people said they had experienced each of these types of cyberbullying with 4% saying they had experienced both.

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The report considers the link between truancy and bullying, concluding that truancy increases from Y9 to Y10 (as it had in the previous wave 1 report), but that overall rates of truancy had dropped significantly in the 2014 wave 2 report as compared to the 2005 wave 1 figures. The link between truancy and bullying remains strong in both cohorts, with 59 of those truanting in 2014 reporting they had been bullied at school. Respondents were then asked about their reasons for truanting, and a range of other factors were raised (such as don't like a particular lesson/subject, or don't like a particular teacher/teachers, or just 'bored') which were stronger than the percentage reporting bullying as their reason for truanting. The report concluded that the relationship between these various factors is likely to be complex.

Rates of bullying vary by characteristic, and are not the same for every young person. How a young person looks is (by a long way) the most important reason cited for being bullied. A much larger proportion of girls than boys reported this as the main reason for which they were bullied. Girls were also much more likely to report name calling, social exclusion and cyberbullying than boys. However boys were more likely to report threats of violence and actual violence than girls.

White and mixed heritage groups reported a higher rate of bullying than for other ethnic groups. The rate of bullying was particularly low for Bangladeshi students. The report notes that this could be related to cultural differences in "what is classified as bullying, or whether a young person chooses to acknowledge this" rather than actual differences in rates of bullying. The report finds that those with special educational needs are more likely to experience bullying than those without. The report also highlights regional differences around the overall rate of 37% of students reporting bullying. The range is from 32% in London to 42% in the south west of England. Different rates of reporting for ethnic groups could be one explanatory factor with London having a high proportion of ethnic minority students, and the south west having a high proportion of white students.

Research in Scotland

[Bullying in Scotland](#) was published by Respect Me (Scotland's anti-bullying service) in 2014. This research was designed to (i) identify the types of bullying experienced by children and young people, (ii) give a clear picture of where bullying happens (iii) identify from children and young people's own experience what they feel works and what is less helpful, and (iv) identify where children and young people go online and what technology they use to get there.

A survey was undertaken across 8 to 19 year olds, with 30% reporting experiencing bullying of some kind. Of this thirty percent, 49% experienced bullying in person, 41% experienced bullying both in person and online, and 10% experienced bullying online only. The report showed that a clear majority of those occurring both on and off line actually started in real life. 92% of children and young people reported knowing the person bullying them and 81% consider their online friends to be all or mostly the same friends as they have in real life. The report concluded that "anonymity therefore may not be what is driving bullying online".

The report considered emotional reactions and the ways young people chose to deal with bullying with telling someone else (parent/carers, friend, teacher/staff) all at the top of the list. Gender differences explored in the report included girls being more likely to ignore incidents, walk away, or stand up to bullies, whilst boys were more likely to report joining in, laughing at what happened or fighting the bully. Whilst telling others definitely made those in the survey feel better, getting others

involved (such as parents, teachers or friends stepping in) seemed to be more effective in actually stopping the bullying.

The most successful interventions in school were those that tackle the ethos and culture of the school/organisation, rather than just focusing on individual incidents as and when they occur. So, interventions such as buddying, mentoring, and having clear anti-bullying policies were seen as more effective by the young people than reporting forms, worry boxes, and playground monitors.

International Comparative Research

Australian government research [Covert Bullying Prevalence Study – Executive Summary](#) has focused on “covert bullying”, defined as any form of bullying which is hidden, including spreading rumours and lies, revealing secrets, excluding others and cyber-bullying. This report noted young people defined cyber bullying as “cruel covert bullying used primarily by young people to harm others using technology such as: social networking sites, other chat-rooms, mobile phones, websites and web-cameras”. This affects around one in six (16 per cent) of Australian students with a slightly higher percentage of girls being affected than boy. The report suggests that students may be encouraged to engage in covert bullying to reduce the likelihood of being detected or reprimanded, and that covert bullying is more likely in classrooms than its overt forms. Peer support was significantly associated with almost every bullying behaviour reported by students with higher peer support and higher levels of social competence reducing the odds of students being covertly bullied. The report noted that those with high levels social understanding but low levels of empathy are more likely to engage in covert bullying behaviours.

[Student Bullying: Overview of Research, Federal Initiatives, and Legal Issues](#) published in October 2013 by the USA Congressional Research Service firstly pointed to the difficulty of comparing different research studies into bullying because of differences in age range, timescale or methodology, and because of differences in how bullying is defined. Subsequently, in 2014, [Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions For Public Health And Recommended Data Elements](#) was published by the Centre for Disease Control & Prevention and the Department of Education in the USA. This embodied a ‘public health approach to bullying, of identifying its prevalence, but also the risk and resilience factors found in young people, in order to develop policies and approaches which could help prevent its occurrence. The definition used is:

“Bullying is any **unwanted aggressive behavior(s)** by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an **observed or perceived power imbalance** and is **repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated**. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational **harm**.”

The paper goes on to define (i) Direct and indirect modes of bullying, (ii) Types of bullying – physical, verbal, relational or damage to property, and (iii) contexts for bullying and their impact (including what is termed as “electronic bullying”).

[Student Bullying: Overview of Research, Federal Initiatives, and Legal Issues](#) outlined research on the precursors for, and impacts of, bullying noting that the interaction of factors such as “families, schools, peer groups, teacher-student relationships, neighbourhoods, and cultural expectations” can have a positive influence on reducing bullying. They also note that bullying generally occurs with the physical or virtual presence of an audience of peers who can play an important role in

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reinforcing bullying behaviour through laughter or other encouragement, or in curbing it by speaking out against the behaviour.

It quoted research on what makes school anti-bullying programmes effective that suggest that the intensity and duration of any programme is linked to its effectiveness. Other elements found important to effectiveness were parent training, parent meetings, firm disciplinary methods, classroom rules, classroom management, and improved playground supervision. The paper reported different research studies as coming to different conclusions in relation to working with peers as part of anti-bullying programmes, but quoted from one study that in peer groups where bullying is the norm, “until these peer norms are modified, it is likely that bullying behaviours will remain intractable in our schools”.

Comment

[Bullying: evidence from LSYPE2 - wave 2](#) in England does provide an up to date picture of prevalence and patterns of bullying, confirming that it is slowly reducing. Nevertheless, because the purpose of the programme is to consider transitions from school to post 16 and post 18 pathways, it does not get to grips with the impact of bullying, and the risk and resilience factors that can be embedded in anti-bullying programmes. [Bullying in Scotland](#) sets out to do this, working within a national framework for action. It gives a more rounded picture of the complex interactions both in and out of school, and on or off line that form the context of young people's lives. Research in Australia and the United States supports this more rounded approach by suggesting that the linking of school, family and community/neighbourhood are important in developing effective school policies to tackle bullying. Those involved in the management and organisation of schools or school governance may find it helpful to reflect on the wider research picture here when considering bullying.

External Links

DfE: [Bullying: evidence from LSYPE2 - wave 2](#) (November 2015)

Respect Me: [Bullying in Scotland](#) (2014)

Mail online: [1,000 bullied pupils have to move schools every month](#) (November 2015)

USA Centre for Disease Control & Prevention: [Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions For Public Health And Recommended Data Elements](#) (2014)

USA Congressional Research Service: [Student Bullying: Overview of Research, Federal Initiatives, and Legal Issues](#) (October 2013)

Unicef: [Child well-being in rich countries: A comparative overview](#) (April 2013)

OFSTED: [No Place for Bullying](#) (June 2012)

British Medical Journal: [Bullying victimisation and risk of self-harm in early adolescence: longitudinal cohort study](#) (March 2012)

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National Centre for Social Research: [Estimating the prevalence of young people absent from school due to bullying](#) (May 2011)

Scottish Government: [A National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People](#) (November 2010)

Australian Government: [Covert Bullying Prevalence Study – Executive Summary](#) (May 2009)

Related Briefings

[Life lessons: PSHE and SRE in schools – Commons Education Committee](#) (March 2015)

[Child well-being in rich countries: international comparisons Unicef report](#) (May 2013)

[Children's Rights Reviewed](#) (February 2013)

[Hidden in plain sight: inquiry into disability-related harassment](#) (September 2011)

For further information, please visit www.lgiu.org.uk or email john.fowler@lgiu.org.uk