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Adolescents' Reporting of Bullying and Peer Victimization In School

What Do They Report and How Can We
Respond?



ADOLESCENTS' REPORTING OF BULLYING AND PEER VICTIMIZATION IN SCHOOL: WHAT DO THEY REPORT AND HOW CAN WE RESPOND?

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INTRODUCTION

School bullying and peer victimization constitute significant problems in school districts. 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 (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014, p. 7). Bullying can take many forms, such as physical (e.g., hitting), verbal (e.g., insults), social (e.g., social exclusion), and cyber-bullying (i.e., sending malicious messages about a person through the internet or cell phone (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2011, about 23% of public schools reported that bullying occurred in school daily and weekly, and about 28% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported being bullied at school (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014). Numerous research findings also document that experiences and exposure to bullying in school can lead to adverse psychosomatic and psychosocial outcomes during adolescence and in adulthood years (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). Empirical evidences also point out that peer victimization is significantly associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors (see Hong, Kral, & Sterzing, 2015, for a review).

In the state of Michigan, several cases of bully-cide (i.e., suicide as a result of bullying victimization) involving adolescents garnered the attention of researchers and politicians. Researchers have recognized that preventing and reducing bullying and harassment in schools is a fundamental right for all children (Day & Cross, 2009). In November 2010, the Michigan State Board of Education adopted a Model Anti-bullying Policy, which prohibits acts of bullying, harassment and violence (Stuart, Cassel, Bell, and Soringer, 2011). In December of 2011, Michigan became the 48th state to mandate school districts to develop and implement policies to protect students from bullying and harassment—a part of a new statewide anti-bullying legislature signed by Michigan governor Rick Snyder (Public Act 241 of 2011). This bill passed with bipartisan support, in response to Matt Epling, a Michigan teen who committed suicide in 2002 due to severe bullying in his school. Despite the passage of the *Model Anti-Bullying Policy* and the statewide anti-bullying law, bullying remains a serious problem in Michigan school districts. Similar to schools in other states, school districts in Michigan have encountered a serious lack of time, training, and administrative support to effectively prevent or intervene in bullying situations (Day & Cross, 2009). According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Systems (YBRSS), 25.3% of high school students in the State of Michigan reported being bullied on school property during the past 12 months, compared to 19.6% of high school students nationwide.

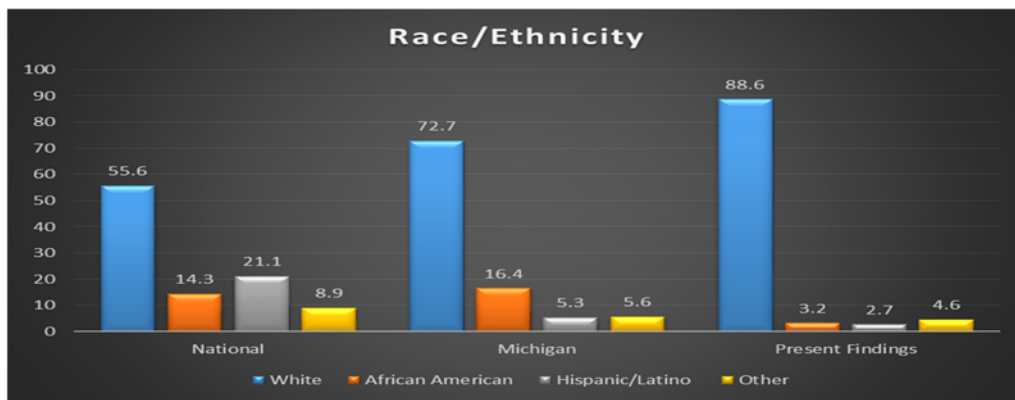
To address the problems of bullying and victimization in Michigan school districts, researchers in the School of Social Work at Wayne State University, attempted to gather data from a large sample adolescents, ages 13-19. The majority (89.3%) attended the ELCA Youth Gathering in

Detroit from July 11, 2015 to July 15, 2015, which was hosted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Adolescents who assented to participating in the study completed an online survey. Questions in the survey pertained to: (a) Demographic Characteristics, (b) School Environment/Academic Performances, (c) Observations and Experiences in Bullying and Peer Victimization in School, (d) Attitudes and Knowledge of Bullies and Victims, and (e) Responses to Bullying and Peer Victimization.

KEY FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics

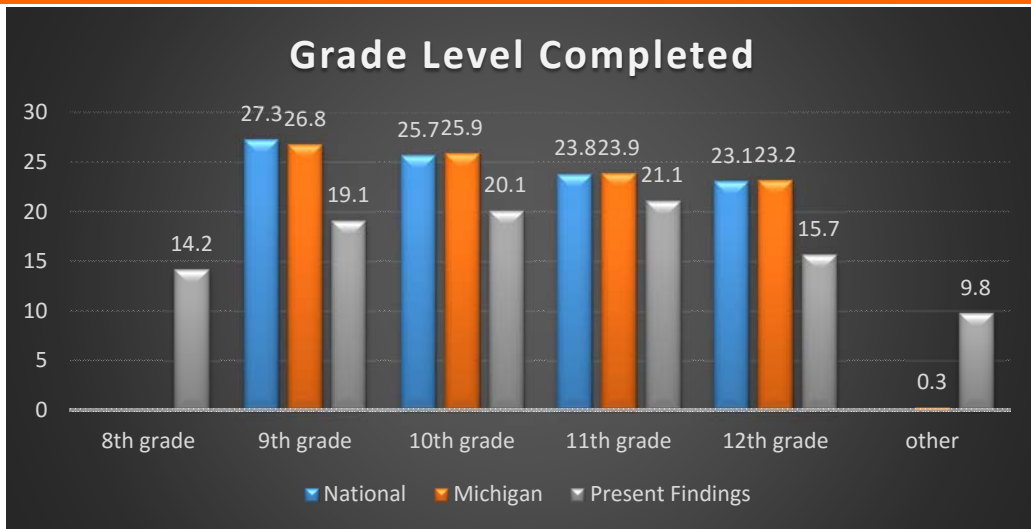
In terms of *race/ethnicity*, of the study participants, 88.6% identified as White, 4.6% as “other”, 3.2% as African American, and 2.7% as Hispanic/Latino. Comparatively, according to the YBRSS, 72.7% of the youth were White, followed by 16.4% African American, 5.6% “other”, and 5.3% Hispanic/Latino.



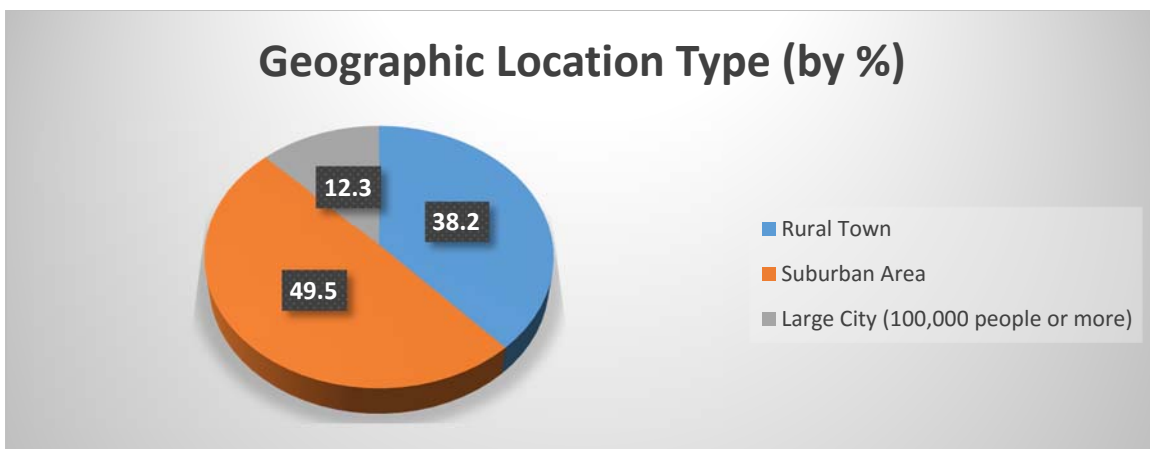
For *gender*, we found that 61.2% of the study participants identified as female, 33.5% were males, and 4.4% were ‘other’.



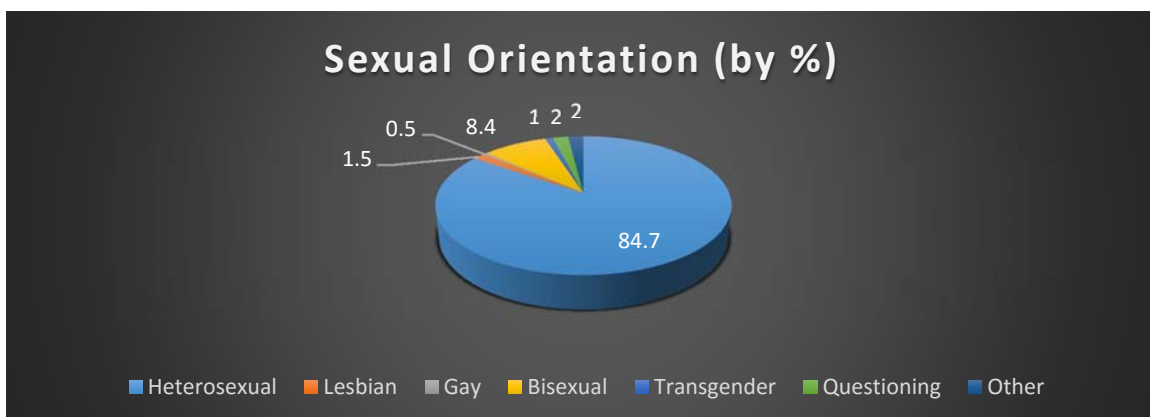
Regarding *grade level completed*, of the 206 students who participated in the study, 14.1% reported completing 8th grade, followed by 18.9% 9th grade, 19.9% 10th grade, 20.9% 11th grade, 15.5% 12th grade, and 9.7% in other.



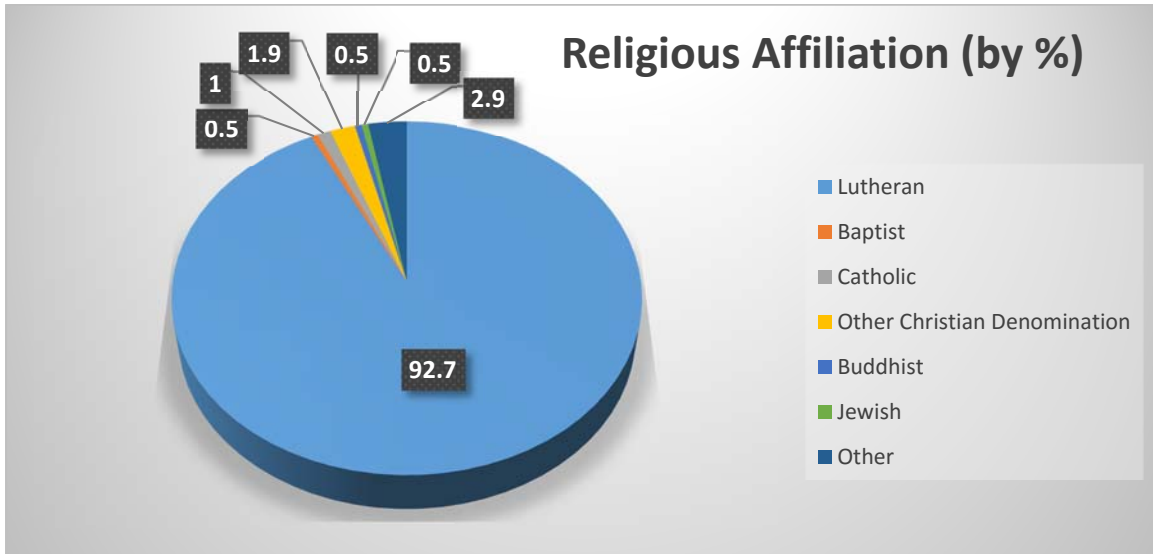
Regarding geographic location type, 49.5% of the participants reside in a suburban area, followed by 37.9% in rural town, and 12.1% in a large city.



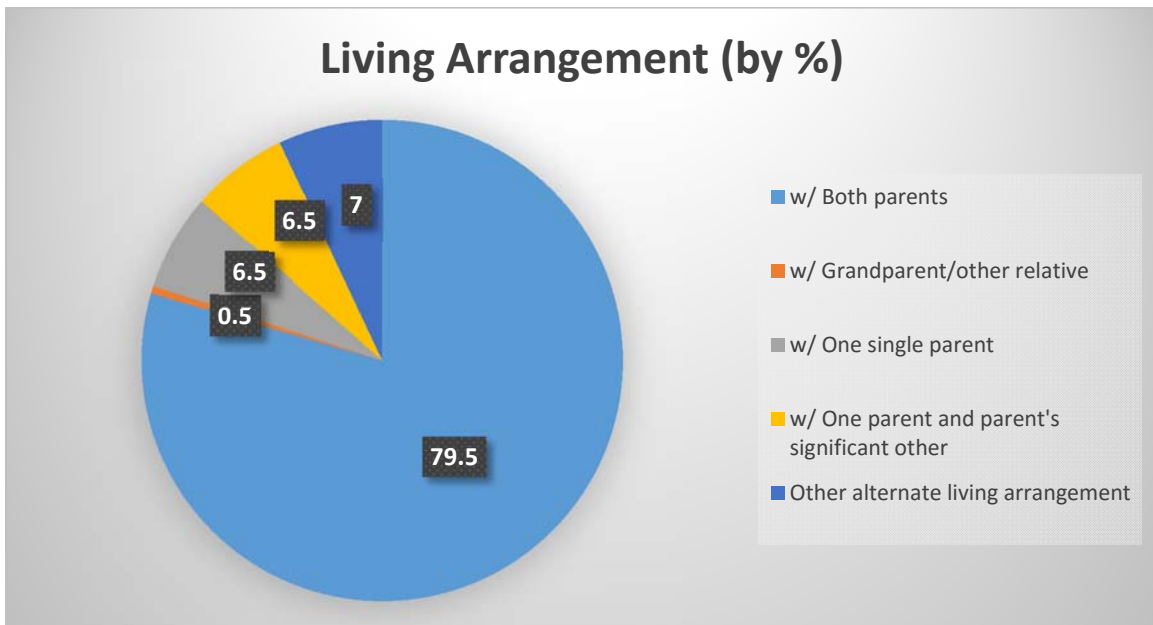
For *sexual orientation*, when asked “[w]hat is your sexual orientation/gender identity?” 83.5% reported heterosexual/straight, followed by 8.3% bisexual, 1.9% (sexually) questioning, 1.9% “other”, 1.5% lesbian, 1.0 transgender, and .5% gay. Three of the participants did not respond to the question about sexual orientation.



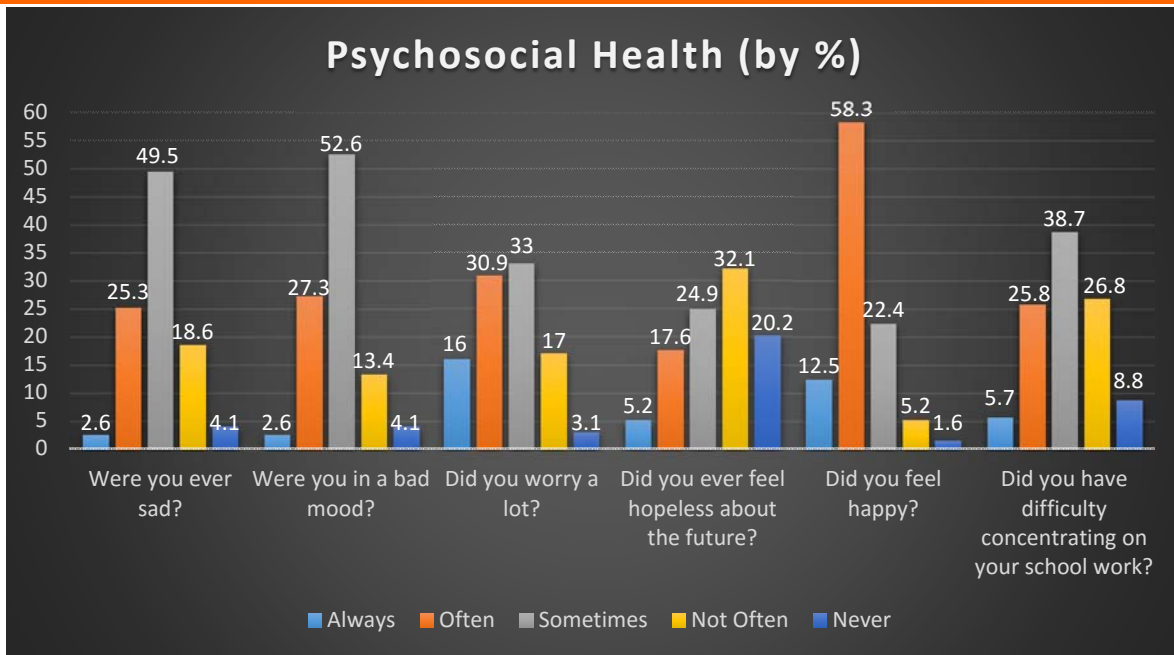
Regarding *religious affiliation*, 92.7% identified as Lutheran, followed by 2.9% “other”, 1.9% other Christian denomination, 1.0% Catholic, 0.5% Baptist, 0.5% Buddhist, and 0.5% Jewish.



For *living arrangement*, 79.5% lived with both parents, while 7.0% reported having other alternate living arrangement, followed by 6.5% living with one parent alone, 6.5% living with one parent and parent’s significant other, and 0.5% living with a grandparent/other relative.



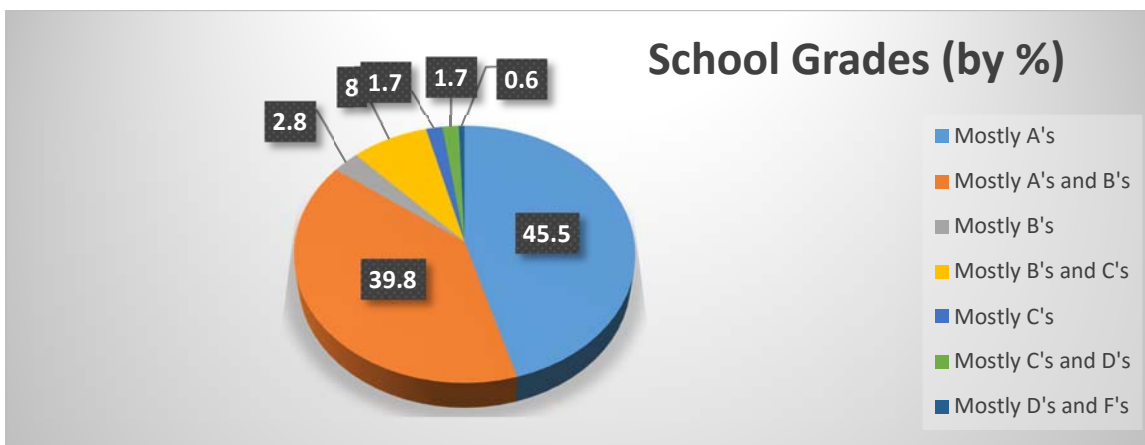
In regards to *psychosocial health*, 25.3% reported being sad often, 27.3% reported being in a bad mood often, 30.9% reported worrying a lot often, 17.6% reported feeling hopeless about the future often, 58.3% reported feeling happy often, and 25.8% reported having difficulty concentrating on school work often.



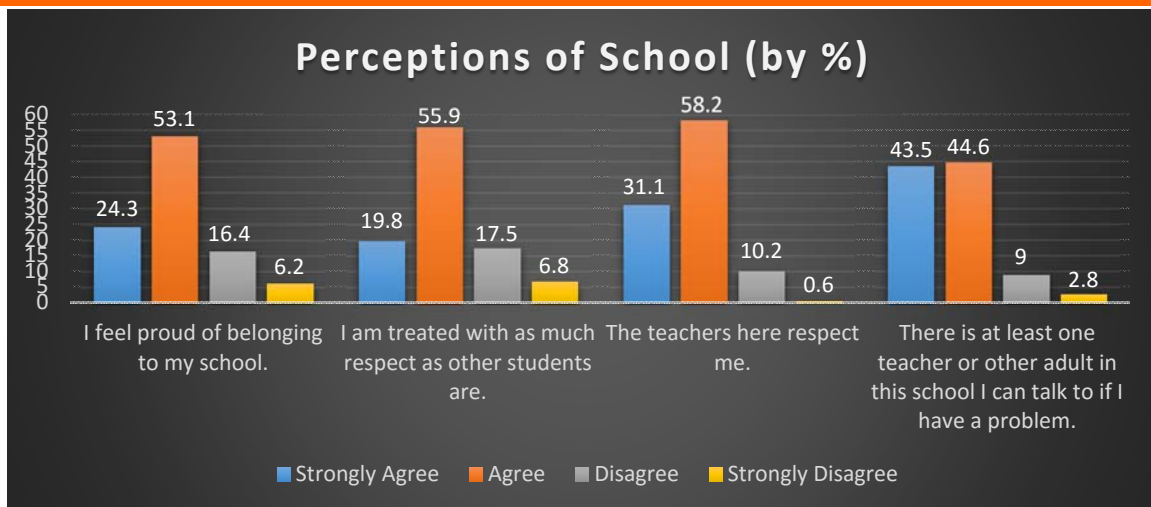
School Environment/Academic Performance

Study participants were asked questions related to their school environment and academic performances. In terms of the *school type* attended by the study participants, 93.7% were attending public school, while 6.3% were in private school.

For *school grades*, 45.5% reported receiving mostly A's, followed by 39.8% receiving mostly A's and B's, 8% receiving mostly B's and C's, 2.8% receiving mostly B's, 1.7% receiving mostly C's, 1.7% receiving mostly C's and D's, and .6% receiving D's and F's.



When asked about their *perceptions of school*, 77.4% strongly agreed/agreed to “feel[ing] proud of belonging to my school”. Also, 75.7% strongly agreed/agreed to “[being] treated with as much respect as other students are”, 89.3% strongly agreed/agreed to “teachers here respect me”, and 88.1% strongly agreed/agreed to “there is at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem”.



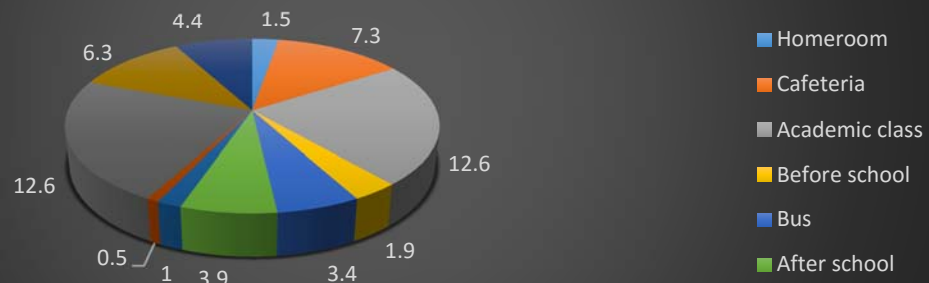
Observations and Experiences in Bullying and Peer Victimization in School

Study participants were asked questions related to observing or experiencing bullying and peer victimization at their school. When they were asked, “Is bullying a problem in your school?” 50.5% responded “yes” while 35.0% responded “no”. When asked, “Have you ever been aware of/witnessed someone bully someone else?” 77.2% of the respondents answered “yes”. When asked, “Did you ever see a student other than yourself who was bullied this school year?” 59.7% responded “yes”. Furthermore, 24.3% responded to seeing students bullied one or more times a week, and 13.6% responded to seeing students bullied one or more times a day. For the question, “Do you think that schools should worry about bullying?” 81.1% responded “yes”. However, when they were asked, “[h]as bullying at your school changed in the last year for you?” 62.1% responded “no”.

Study participants were asked questions related to observing various types of bullying and victimization in school. When asked “[a]t school, how often have you seen others being kicked or pushed by a student”, 37.8% responded “sometimes”, followed by 25.6% “once”, and 5.8% “often”. For the question, “[h]ow often have you seen others being badly beaten up”, 57.3% responded “never”, followed by 10.7% “sometimes” and 0.5% “often”. When asked, “[a]t school, how often have you seen others being threatened with a knife or sharp weapon?” 76.7% responded “never”, while 18.0% responded “once” and 5.2% “sometimes”. Regarding the question, “[a]t school, how often have you heard of other students being verbally or emotionally abused by a student?” 39.5% responded “often”, followed by 36.5% “sometimes”, 18.6% “never”, and 5.4% “once”. With regards to the question, “[a]t school, how often have you heard of other students being sexually harassed by a student?” 47.6% responded “never”, followed by 25.9% “sometimes”, 18.2% “once”, and 8.2% “often”.

In terms of *most frequent locations where bullying occurred*, 12.6% responded to academic class and 12.6% in the hallway, followed by 7.3% in cafeteria, 6.3% online, 23.3% after school, 12.6% in a hallway, 4.4% via text message, 1.9% before school, 1.5% in a homeroom, 1.1% in a gym, 1.0% in a bathroom, and 0.5% in dances. Of the 206 study participants, 43.7% did not respond.

Most frequent locations where bullying occurred (by %)

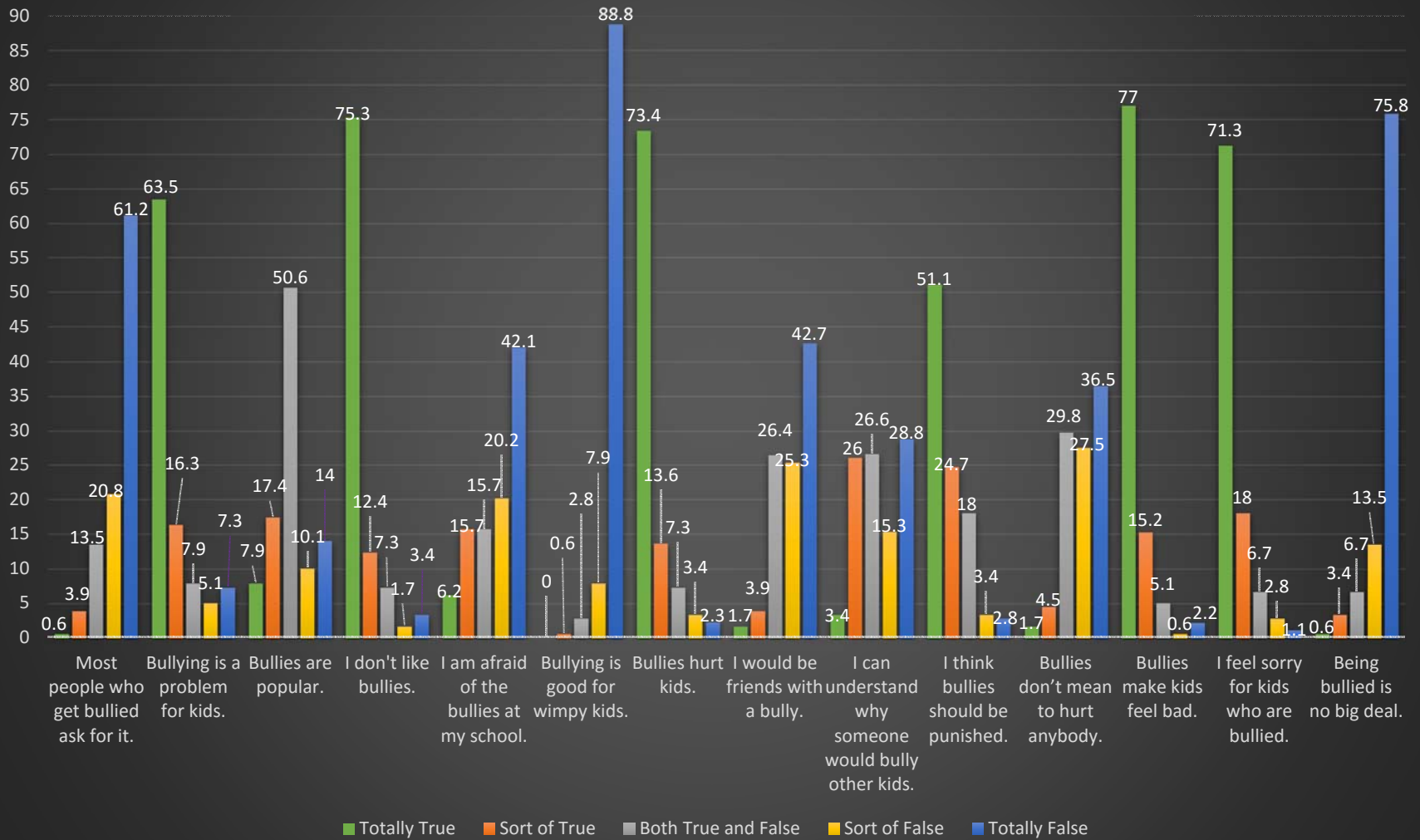


Attitudes and Knowledge of Bullies and Victims

Study participants were presented with several statements that measure their *perceptions of bullying*. When asked whether “most people who get bullied ask for it”, 4.5% responded totally true/sort of true. For the question “[b]ullying is a problem for kids”, 79.8% responded totally true/sort of true. Regarding the statement, “I don’t like bullies”, 87.7% responded totally true/sort of true while 7.3% responded both true and false. Moreover, 21.9% responded totally true/sort of true to the statement, “I am afraid of the bullies at my school”; 0.6% to “Bullying is good for wimpy kids”, 87% to “Bullies hurt kids”; 5.6% to “I would be friends with a bully”; 29.4% to “I can understand why someone would bully other kids”; 75.8% to “I think bullies should be punished”; 6.2% to “Bullies don’t mean to hurt anyone”; 92.2% to “Bullies make kids feel bad”; 89.3% to “I feel sorry for kids who are bullied”; and 4.0% to “[b]eing bullied is no big deal” .



Attitudes and Knowledge of Bullies and Victims (by %)



Response to Bullying and Peer Victimization

Study participants were asked questions about response to the incidence of bullying in their schools. When asked, “[i]f you witnessed a bullying incident, how did you respond?” 41.7% responded “I said something to the bully/-ies”, followed by 26.8% “I told a teacher or an adult”, 22.8% “I did nothing”, and 8.7% “Other”. Regarding the question, “If you did nothing after witnessing a bullying incident, why did you do nothing?” 58.6% responded “I was too afraid I would be bullied”, followed by 34.5% “I didn’t care” and 6.9% “I felt the victim/s deserved it.” And finally, when asked “[i]s the anti-bullying program or policy in your school enforced?” 50.0% responded “sometimes”, followed by 18.8% “all of the time”, 17.6% “don’t know”, 10.0% “never”, and 3.5% “not applicable, my school does not have a policy”.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Considering the serious outcomes associated with witnessing and experiencing bullying in school, both short-term and long-term, it is understandable that school bullying programs and policies have been developed and implemented across school districts. Many anti-bullying programs have been implemented in an effort to prevent or reduce school bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). However, the one-size-fits-all nature of many anti-bullying programs have been met with disappointing results. For instance, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), a comprehensive approach that includes community-wide, school-wide, class-wide, and individual component appears to be promising. OBPP has been found to reduce bullying and increase prosocial behavior of students in Europe. When implemented in the U.S., it has been met with mixed results. One study found that while it was effective for White students, it was not as effective for racial and ethnic minority students (Bauer, Lozano, & Rivara, 2007). Bullying prevention and intervention programs need to consider incorporating various forms of prejudice (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), which are associated with bullying.

It is also important that practitioners draw upon high-quality, evidence-based programs (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Programs need to focus on providing students with life and social skills rather than just knowledge about bullying. The following evidence-based programs have been found to be promising (Espelage, 2015):

- *KiVa National Anti-Bullying Programme*
 - Universal, school-based program that addresses bullying through collaborations with students, teachers, parents, families, community leaders
 - Components: (a) teacher training, (b) student lessons, (c) virtual learning environment
 - Goal is to motivate students to apply skills learned about bullying
 - Research shows significant decrease in self-reported bullying and self- and peer-reported victimization in 4th-6th graders, and increases empathy and anti-bullying attitudes
 - Has been found to reduce bullying and aggressive behaviors in the school playground and increase in positive peer interactions
- *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)*

- Goal is to promote social and emotional competence and reduce aggression
- Some of the components are targeted at parents but most are targeted at classroom teachers who receive training
- Research findings indicate reduction in aggressive approach to problem solving and increases in prosocial behaviors
- *Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention*
 - Goal is to decrease aggression, bullying behavior, and substance abuse, and increase school success
 - Considers (a) risk and protective factors for substance abuse, violence, delinquency, and other problem behavior, (b) bullying, (c) brain research, (d) positive approaches to problem behavior, and (e) developmental needs of adolescents
 - Consists of lessons, including additional practice activity, reflective writing, homework, integration activities, journal
 - Consists of 5 program themes: (a) empathy and communication, (b) Bullying prevention, (c) Emotion management, (d) Problem-solving, (e) Substance abuse prevention
- *Steps to Respect: A Bullying Prevention Program*
 - Goal is to help students build supportive relationships with one another
 - Promotes a whole-school approach to prevention by addressing factors at school, peer, family, and individual levels

In addition, programs that promotes prosocial behavior, and those focusing on socio-emotional development and learning appears to be effective in reducing bullying behavior; however, they may not yield positive results without considering adolescents' primary peer groups (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012). Rather than exclusively targeting adolescents identified as bullies or victims, programs also need to consider bystander behavior in bullying situations, given that such situations occur when bystanders are present (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). In other words, anti-bullying programs and policies need to go beyond the scope of the individual adolescents and target wider systematic factors, such as peer groups (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

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