

An Examination of Bullying in Georgia Schools: Demographic and School Climate Factors Associated with Willingness to Intervene in Bullying Situations

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Supervising Section Editor: Abigail Hankin, MD, MPH

Submission history: Submitted December 14, 2012; Revision received February 21, 2013; Accepted March 6, 2013

Full text available through open access at http://escholarship.org/uc/uciem_westjem

DOI: 10.5811/westjem.2013.3.15637

Introduction: Research dedicated to identification of precursors to cases of aggravated bullying in schools has led to enhanced knowledge of risk factors for both victimization and perpetration. However, characteristics among those who are more likely to intervene in such situations are less understood. The purpose of this study is to examine the associations between demographic characteristics, school climate and psychosocial factors, and willingness to intervene in a bullying situation among middle and high school students in Georgia.

Methods: We computed analyses using cross-sectional data from the Georgia Student Health Survey II (GSHS 2006) administered to public school students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 (n=175,311). We used logistic regression analyses to determine the demographic, school climate and psychosocial factors associated with a willingness to intervene in a bullying situation.

Results: Students who were white and who were girls were most likely to report willingness to intervene in bullying situations. Several school-climate factors, such as feeling safe at school, liking school, feeling successful at school and perceiving clear rules at school, were associated with willingness to intervene, while youth who reported binge drinking were less willing to intervene.

Conclusion: These findings, while preliminary, indicate that girls, students who are white, and students who experience a relatively positive school climate and adaptive psychosocial factors are more likely to report that they would intervene in bullying situations. These findings may guide how bullying is addressed in schools and underscore the importance of safe school climates. [West J Emerg Med. 2013;14(4):324–328.]

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant concern nationally in the number of reported school bullying incidents across the United States (U.S.). Approximately 30% of students report being involved in bullying situations as bullies, victims, or bully-victims.¹ A promising new area for bullying prevention and intervention research is considering the role of bystanders and their willingness to intervene in a bullying incident.

Recent findings show that students' willingness to intervene is linked to the bystander's perception of the level of harm.² Intriguingly, empirical data on the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of youth who may be willing to intervene is scarce, even though this information can be beneficial to the design and implementation of new strategies to reduce bullying and its many adverse consequences among youth.

The current study sought to remedy this gap by addressing 2 largely unaddressed research questions about how common is it for youth to be willing to intervene in a bullying situation and determining the characteristics of the youth who are willing to intervene. This research is a direct extension of previous literature^{2,3} and sought to address these questions by empirically examining existing data from the Georgia Student Health Survey II (GSHS, 2006) to determine the prevalence of students willing to intervene in bullying situations, the characteristics of these students and the climate within their schools to benefit future research and practice related to bullying prevention.

METHODS

The Georgia Student Health Survey, conducted in 2006, was administered to 181,316 students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12.⁴ Data were collected in middle and high schools to assess youth risk behaviors and other factors.⁵ Of the 181,316 completed questionnaires, 6,005 were eliminated due to an affirmative response on a validity check question regarding a fictitious drug (Have you ever used the drug zenabrilatol?), resulting in 175,311 remaining valid completed questionnaires. The overall participation rate was 45.9%. The survey was designed by the state's Department of Education to gather information required by the Federal Department of Education for annual yearly progress reporting. Students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 who attended public middle and high schools participated in the study by completing the surveys anonymously and on school computers during school hours. The survey was a census; all public schools in the state of Georgia were invited to participate. However, participation rates varied. The study sought parental permission for participation via a passive consent process. The authors received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Georgia State University to conduct these secondary analyses.

Measures

The primary purpose of the GSHS II was to examine behaviors, beliefs and trends pertaining to student health. Specifically, several questions pertained to school climate, drug and alcohol usage and access, as well as other health-related behaviors. With respect to bullying, students were asked separate questions to determine if they had been bullied or threatened or if they had bullied or threatened others in the past 30 days. These 2 questions were combined to determine what bullying experiences student may have had (bully-perpetrators, bullying victims, both, or neither). Students were also asked if they would help someone who was being bullied.

Analysis

We conducted a cross-sectional multilogistic regression analysis to determine the associations between willingness to intervene in a bullying incident and demographics, psychosocial characteristics and school climate factors in a

multivariate model. The 3-level outcome variable indicated whether a student was always, or was sometimes, willing to intervene versus not at all willing to intervene in a bullying situation. We analyzed the data using the SAS 9.2 and SUDAAN 10.0 statistical software.

RESULTS

Among study participants, 27.9% indicated being involved in bullying incidents as a bully, victim or bully-victim. Moreover, 91.6% of students indicated they would be willing to intervene (always 41.2% or sometimes 50.4%) in a bullying situation. Girls and students identified as white were most likely to report a willingness to always intervene in a bullying situation (Table 1). Students' own experiences with bullying had a relationship with their willingness to intervene as those who identified themselves as bullies were most likely to report that they were always willing to intervene in a bullying situation (Adjusted odds ratio [OR]= 1.26; 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.17-1.35) (Table 2). Similarly students teased in the last 30 days (Adjusted OR=1.42; CI: 1.36-1.49) were also more willing to intervene. Several school climate factors, such as feeling safe at school (Adjusted OR= 1.83; 95% CI: 1.75-1.91), feeling successful (Adjusted OR= 1.94; 95% CI: 1.78-2.12), reporting clear school rules (Adjusted OR= 1.95; 95% CI: 1.83-2.08) or liking school (Adjusted OR= 2.28; 95% CI: 2.11-2.24), were associated with always being willing to intervene in a bullying situation. The only school climate factor that did not have an impact on student's willingness to always intervene was students that missed school due to feeling unsafe (Adjusted OR= 0.81; 95% CI: 0.74-0.87). In terms of psychosocial factors, those who reported binge drinking (Adjusted OR=0.73; 95% CI: 0.69-0.78) were less likely to report that they were always willing to intervene. No associations were observed between drug use or any suicidal ideation and willingness to intervene.

DISCUSSION

This study found that levels of bullying in the state of Georgia mirror that of estimates for the U.S.⁶ Also, the study found significant associations between several demographic and school climate factors and the willingness to intervene in a bullying situation. Students who were girls and white, and students who felt safe and successful at school were most likely to report that they would intervene. It was intriguing to find that several of the school climate factors examined, such as feeling safe at school, liking school, feeling successful at school and perceiving clear rules at school, were associated with willingness to always intervene. These findings, combined with the high prevalence of willingness to intervene, suggest students may be willing and interested in participating in more structured bullying prevention and intervention initiatives.⁷

Previous research has documented that students felt safer when a bystander intervened to help the victim, and

Table 1. Wording of variables included in the analyses of participants in the Georgia Student Health Survey II (2006).

Variable	Wording and response options
Willingness to intervene	I would help someone who was being bullied (always, sometimes, never).
Bully victim	Have been bullied or threatened by other students (yes or no), in past 30 days.
Bully	Bullied or threatened other students (yes or no).
Always/Sometimes like school	I like school (always, sometimes, or not at all).
Always/Sometimes feel successful at school	I feel successful at school (always, sometimes, or not at all).
Always/Sometimes clear rules at school	My school sets clear rules for behavior (always, sometimes or not at all).
Any binge drinking	I have drunk five or more drinks of alcohol at one sitting during the last 30 days (yes, no).
Any drug use	I have used... smoking tobacco, chewing tobacco, marijuana, cocaine, inhalants, steroids, ecstasy and/or methamphetamines (number of days used in past 30 days). (Measures were aggregated to indicate any use of any of these substances).
Considered suicide	I seriously considered attempting suicide (yes, no) in past 12 months.
Missed school	Have been absent from school because they have felt I would be unsafe at school or on my way to or from school (yes or no).
Teased	Have been picked on or teased at school (yes or no).
School safety	School is a place at which I feel safe (always, sometimes, not really very safe, no, it's dangerous).

conversely felt unsafe when students joined in the bullying.⁷ In other words, a systematic, all-encompassing approach needs to be employed to make students more comfortable to intervene.⁷⁻⁸ Moreover, previous research shows that in schools where students perceived more positive school climates and were less accepting of bullying, students were more likely to intervene.⁹ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that bullies were most likely to always be willing to intervene in comparison to victims or bully-victims. While this finding may seem counterintuitive, there is a plausible explanation. Many bullies may have been victimized previously and some researchers speculate that they may in fact have the ability to empathize better than once expected and as such, may be more willing to intervene in situations involving other bullies. Furthermore, researchers have presented a conceptual framework that represents students' motives relating to willingness to intervene as it pertains to their 1) Interpretation of harm; 2.) Emotional reaction; 3) Social evaluating; 4) Moral evaluating; and 5) Intervention self-efficacy. Based on this model, the more confident students may be regarding favorable outcomes, the more likely they are to intervene.

Findings regarding willingness to intervene also have implications for how bullying is addressed in the educational system. Preferably, bullying prevention programs in school should be designed to be more comprehensive and also build on evidenced-based programs.¹⁰⁻¹¹ There are numerous potential benefits of enhancing and strengthening the school climate, such as increased academic achievement, improved

attendance and fewer behavioral problems. However, further research needs to examine the role of school climate and the factors that may facilitate a student's willingness to intervene in bullying situations. In addition, future research should determine the extent to which levels of willingness to intervene is modifiable and can safely be encouraged among students as part of a comprehensive bullying prevention program in school settings.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations of this study that should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the results from the survey may not be generalizable to other populations or youth who no longer attend school. Second, while the study was based on a census of students in Georgia, not a sample, the relatively low participation rate (45.9%) may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond students who participated in the survey. Nonetheless, the analyses are based on a very large number of participants (n=175,311). Third, while the findings show statistically significant associations, more specific temporal ordering cannot be determined, nor can causality be inferred. Finally, this study only examined students' willingness to intervene and not their actual behavior. As reported by others, those who indicate they would always intervene in our survey may not do so when confronted with an actual bullying incident.¹¹ Students may report wanting to help, but they may overestimate their willingness to actually respond.¹⁰ While research is limited in this area, it has been estimated that approximately 19% of

Table 2. Demographic, school climate and psychosocial factors and their association with willingness to intervene in a bullying incident among participants in the Georgia Student Health Survey II (2006).

	Always willing to intervene vs. never adjusted OR (95% CI)	Sometimes willing to intervene vs. never adjusted OR (95% CI)
Sex		
Girls	1.66 (1.60-1.73)	1.41 (1.36-1.46)
Boys	1.00	1.00
Grade		
6 th	0.68 (0.64-0.72)	0.56 (0.52-0.59)
8 th	0.68 (0.64-0.73)	0.68 (0.64-0.72)
10 th	0.79 (0.75-0.85)	0.86 (0.81-0.92)
12 th	1.00	1.00
Race		
Black	1.00	1.00
Hispanic	1.42 (1.32-1.52)	1.11 (1.04-1.19)
White	3.42 (3.28-3.57)	2.23 (2.14-2.33)
Asian	1.30 (1.18-1.44)	1.25 (1.14-1.37)
Other	1.69 (1.55-1.84)	1.25 (1.15-1.35)
School climate factors		
Missed school due to feeling unsafe	0.81 (0.74-0.87)	0.62 (0.57-0.67)
Teased	1.42 (1.36-1.49)	1.39 (1.32-1.45)
Feel safe at school	1.83 (1.75-1.91)	1.15 (1.10-1.21)
Always like school	2.28 (2.11-2.46)	1.18 (1.10-1.28)
Sometimes like school	2.12 (2.00-2.24)	1.87 (1.77-1.97)
Always feel successful	1.94 (1.78-2.12)	1.65 (1.52-1.79)
Sometimes feel successful	1.62 (1.50-1.75)	1.79 (1.67-1.93)
Always clear rules at school	1.95 (1.83-2.08)	1.72 (1.62-1.83)
Sometimes clear rules at school	1.41 (1.32-1.50)	1.66 (1.56-1.77)
Psychosocial factors		
Binge drinking	0.73 (0.69-0.78)	0.70 (0.66-0.74)
Drug use	0.99 (0.94-1.04)	1.00 (0.95-1.05)
Considered suicide	0.99 (0.93-1.05)	0.86 (0.81-0.91)
Role		
Bully	1.26 (1.17-1.35)	0.99 (0.92-1.06)
Victim	0.61 (0.58-0.65)	0.87 (0.82-0.92)
Bully-victim	0.75 (0.69-0.80)	0.86 (0.80-0.92)
Neither	1.00	1.00

CI, confidence interval

All variables included in the multivariate model. Reference categories were those student who reported the absence of the factor measured (i.e., did not miss school due to feeling unsafe, were not teased, did not feel safe at school, did not like school, did not feel successful at school, did not report clear rules at school, did not binge drink, did not use drugs, did not consider suicide).

students actually intervene. Intriguingly, when students intervene they are 57% successful in stopping the bullying within 10 seconds.¹² As such, the self-reported willingness to intervene and the factors that may increase the likelihood of actually intervening in a bullying situation remain an important area for future research and program implementation. Furthermore, we recommend development of

new tools to better assess student levels of actually intervening through questionnaires that can provide more variability in responses. The scarce research in this area combined with our current findings give us better insight about the youth who report being willing to intervene and the school factors that may increase willingness to intervene, but they also raise important questions for future research.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was to examine youth willingness to intervene in bullying situations in a very large population of students in Georgia. Intriguingly, the vast majority of students indicated they would be willing to intervene in a bullying situation. The findings also demonstrate that a positive school climate is associated with a willingness to intervene. These findings provide empirical support for strategies that seek to develop effective bullying prevention programs that involve students. In particular, several potentially modifiable factors, such as feeling safe at school, liking school and feeling successful at school, were found to be associated with willingness to intervene. These factors can be targeted in prevention programs and guide future research to build a stronger school climate that may in turn prevent and reduce bullying and thereby reduce its adverse impact on learning and mental health.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This manuscript is an abbreviated version of a thesis submitted by the lead author, under the supervision of Dr. Swahn, in fulfillment of the MPH degree awarded by the School of Public Health, Georgia State University.

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Conflicts of Interest: By the WestJEM article submission agreement, all authors are required to disclose affiliations, funding sources and financial or management relationships that could be perceived as potential sources of bias. The authors disclosed none.

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