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Brief report: Associations between in-person and electronic bullying victimization and missing school because of safety concerns among U.S. high school students



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ABSTRACT

Although associations between bullying and health risk behaviors are well-documented, research on bullying and education-related outcomes, including school attendance, is limited. This study examines associations between bullying victimization (in-person and electronic) and missing school because of safety concerns among a nationally representative sample of U.S. high school students. We used logistic regression analyses to analyze data from the 2013 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey of students in grades 9–12. In-person and electronic victimization were each associated with increased odds of missing school due to safety concerns compared to no bullying victimization. Having been bullied both in-person and electronically was associated with greater odds of missing school compared to electronic bullying only for female students and in-person bullying only for male students. Collaborations between health professionals and educators to prevent bullying may improve school attendance.

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Introduction

Associations between bullying and health risk behaviors are well-documented (Sigurdson, Wallander, & Sund, 2014). However, limited research examines bullying and education-related outcomes, including school attendance, a gap recognized in the scientific literature (Beran & Li, 2007; Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003) and recently highlighted in the popular media. In 2013, *The Atlantic* published a critique of a commonly cited figure—more than 160 000 students miss school each day to avoid being bullied—noting that the data source is unclear and outdated (Barkhorn, 2013). However, the author acknowledged how such a statistic can galvanize support for bullying prevention (Barkhorn, 2013), suggesting that additional research is needed to better understand the relationship between bullying and missing school.

According to the 2013 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 7.1% of U.S. high school students did not attend school at least once during the prior 30 days because of safety concerns (Kann et al., 2014). However, this statistic could reflect students who felt unsafe for reasons other than bullying, such as living in a high-crime neighborhood. The current study uses YRBS data

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Table 1
Prevalence of bullying victimization by sex, race/ethnicity, and grade, National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2013

	In-person and electronic (n = 1144)	In-person only (n = 1355)	Electronic only (n = 732)	Not bullied (n = 10 256)	p-value ^a
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	
Total	9.2 (8.5–10.0)	10.4 (9.8–11.2)	5.6 (5.0–6.2)	74.8 (73.3–76.2)	
Sex					<0.0001
Female	13.1 (11.8–14.5)	10.6 (9.9–11.4)	7.9 (6.9–9.0)	68.4 (66.4–70.3)	
Male	5.3 (4.7–6.0)	10.2 (9.2–11.4)	3.3 (2.7–4.0)	81.2 (79.5–82.9)	
Race/ethnicity					<0.0001
Non-Hispanic Black	4.3 (3.6–5.1)	8.4 (7.1–9.9)	4.4 (3.4–5.7)	82.9 (81.0–84.6)	
Hispanic	7.7 (6.4–8.2)	10.0 (8.7–11.6)	5.1 (4.2–6.2)	77.2 (74.7–79.4)	
Non-Hispanic White	10.8 (9.8–12.0)	10.9 (9.8–12.2)	6.1 (5.2–7.1)	72.2 (69.8–74.4)	
Grade					<0.0001
9th	11.4 (9.9–13.1)	13.6 (12.3–15.0)	4.7 (3.8–5.8)	70.3 (67.9–72.7)	
10th	9.6 (8.3–11.2)	12.6 (11.0–14.4)	4.8 (3.9–6.1)	73.0 (70.3–75.5)	
11th	8.5 (7.0–10.3)	8.3 (7.1–9.7)	6.4 (5.4–7.5)	76.9 (74.5–79.0)	
12th	6.8 (5.8–7.9)	6.6 (5.3–8.1)	6.7 (5.9–7.7)	80.0 (77.7–82.1)	

CI = confidence interval.

^a P-values compare distributions (chi-square statistics) of bullying victimization by demographic characteristics.

to document links between bullying and absenteeism by examining associations between bullying victimization and missing school because of safety concerns. Given increasing attention to electronic bullying as a distinct type of bullying (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013), this study specifically explores electronic bullying in addition to in-person bullying at school.

Method

Data from the 2013 YRBS conducted among a nationally-representative sample of U.S. high school students in grades 9–12 were used (n = 13 583). The national YRBS procedures were approved by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Institutional Review Board and are described elsewhere (Kann et al., 2014). Participants answered two items about bullying victimization: "During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?" (hereafter referred to as in-person) and "During the past 12 months, have you ever been electronically bullied? (include being bullied through e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, Web sites, or texting.)" Responses from both questions were used to create a categorical predictor variable: 1- bullied in-person and electronically; 2- bullied only in-person; 3- bullied only electronically; and 4- not bullied. The outcome variable was dichotomized so that students who reported missing school ≥ 1 day(s) during the past 30 days because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on the way to or from school were considered to be missing school because of safety concerns.

Chi-square tests examined bivariate differences in bullying prevalence by demographic characteristics. Logistic regression models were used to explore associations between bullying victimization and missing school because of safety concerns. The models were stratified by sex given that girls and boys may be differentially involved in bullying (Nansel et al. 2001; Wang, Jannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Adjusted analyses controlled for grade, race/ethnicity, and physical fighting on school property during the past 12 months. Weighted data were analyzed with SUDAAN version 9.3 (RTI International, Research Triangle Park, NC) to account for the complex sampling design.

Results

About one-quarter (25.2%) of students experienced bullying during the past 12 months. Overall, 9.2% were bullied both in-person and electronically, 10.4% were bullied only in-person, and 5.6% were bullied only electronically (Table 1). Among bullied students, 15.5% missed ≥ 1 day(s) of school because of safety concerns during the past 30 days compared to 4.1% of students who were not bullied ($p < 0.0001$).

Comparing types of bullying victimization to no victimization (Table 2), in-person and electronic bullying victimization were independently associated with missing school because of safety concerns among both male and female students, even when adjusting for physical fighting on school property. Similarly, female and male students who experienced both types of bullying had more than five and six times the odds, respectively, of missing school because of safety concerns (Female AOR = 5.34, 95% CI = 3.72–7.66; Male AOR = 6.68, 95% CI = 4.73–9.42).

Some differences between female and male students were observed when comparing types of bullying. Female students experiencing both types of bullying had greater odds of missing school compared to those bullied only electronically (AOR = 2.54, 95% CI = 1.33–4.83). Female students bullied only in-person had greater odds of missing school because of safety concerns compared to those bullied only electronically (AOR = 1.76, 95% CI = 1.09–2.83). Male students experiencing both types of bullying had greater odds of missing school compared to those bullied only in-person (AOR = 2.37, 95% CI = 1.55–3.64).¹

¹ Data presented in-text only.

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