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School-level contextual predictors of bullying and harassment experiences among adolescents

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Bullying and prejudice-based harassment frequently occur in school settings and have significant consequences for the health and wellbeing of young people. Yet far fewer studies have examined the role of the school environment in peer harassment than individual factors. This multilevel study examined associations between a variety of school-level risk and protective factors and student-level reports of bullying and prejudice-based harassment during adolescence.
Methods: Data come from 8th, 9th, and 11th graders who completed the 2013 Minnesota Student Survey ($N = 122{,}180$ students nested in 505 schools). School-level variables were created by aggregating student report data in five areas: academic orientation to school, internal assets, teacher–student relationship quality, feelings of safety at school, and receipt of disciplinary action.
Results: Results indicated that youth attending schools with a higher proportion of students with strong internal assets had lower odds of nearly every type of bullying and prejudice-based harassment assessed when compared to youth attending schools with a lower proportion of students with strong internal assets. Additionally, the proportion of students feeling unsafe at school was a fairly consistent risk factor for most types of peer harassment.
Conclusion: Findings support the idea that prevention programs aimed at improving school-wide internal assets and feelings of safety at school may be key prevention points.
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A robust literature has documented the deleterious effects of bullying on the emotional, academic, and physical wellbeing of young people (Copeland et al., 2013; Gini and Pozzoli, 2009; Kim et al., 2011; Nansel et al., 2001; Ttofi et al., 2011). As the field has grown, conceptions of bullying have expanded from traditional, physical forms of bullying (e.g., hitting, kicking) to include relational bullying, in which social relationships are harmed (e.g., spreading rumors, exclusion, the “silent treatment”), and cyberbullying, which involves threatening or harming someone through electronic means such as text messages, social media, and email (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a,b). Researchers now recognize prejudice-based harassment, that is, bullying based on personal characteristics such as race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc., to be common and as harmful as or more harmful than general bullying (Felix et al., 2009; Hightow-Weidman et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2012). In spite of differences in these behaviors, we use the terms “bullying” and “peer harassment” interchangeably to describe the full array of aggressive behaviors addressed in this paper.

Much of this burgeoning field of study has focused on the individual characteristics, experiences, and health outcomes of perpetrators, victims, and those who play both roles, or on schools as sites for intervention and prevention programs. Although this work has contributed to important progress in bringing bullying to the center of discussion on youth health, solid answers and clear approaches to prevention remain elusive: many U.S. school-based bullying prevention programs show no or modest improvements on students' behavior (Farrington and Ttofi, 2009; Merrell et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2004).

Finding ways to improve school prevention efforts are critical because bullying has been established as a key public health problem among youth (Espelage and de la Rue, 2013). Research indicates that involvement in bullying as a perpetrator, victim, or both is closely tied to physical and mental health, as well as academic performance, both concurrently and longitudinally. For

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example, a recent prospective study by Copeland and colleagues (2014) found that individuals who were targets of bullying in childhood and adolescence had higher levels of low-grade inflammation in early adulthood, as indexed by c-reactive protein, than those uninvolved in bullying. Taken together with studies establishing greater rates of psychiatric disorders, substance use, and suicidality in young adulthood (Copeland et al., 2013; Wolke and Lereya, 2015), bullying involvement has become a health outcome in and of itself.

Research using social ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has established the importance of individual, family, school, community, and cultural factors in peer harassment (Barboza et al., 2009; Espelage and de la Rue, 2013). Each level makes an important contribution to understanding this complex behavior (Cook et al., 2010). From this perspective, understanding the contextual environment in which a student acts is critical to fully understanding behavior. Evidence suggests that elements of the school environment may be particularly relevant to bullying prevention. Researchers often assess school climate, or the “quality and character of school life” (National School Climate Council, 2007), by assessing students' perceptions of the school environment, such as feelings of safety, relationships with teachers, and engagement (Bradshaw et al., 2014). At the school level, school climate is typically conceptualized as an overall measure of the school environment, though researchers differ on which specific elements of the school environment are most relevant. Recent meta-analyses indicate that school climate is an important contextual predictor of bullying involvement for youth who bully others, are bullied by others, or who experience both roles (Cook et al., 2010; Thapa et al., 2013). Furthermore, positive school climate may protect youth who are particularly vulnerable to peer harassment (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning students) by buffering them from problems typically associated with harassment victimization, including internalizing problems, substance use, and truancy (Birkett et al., 2009). Knowledge about the effects of a broad range of school contextual predictors, including school climate, is needed to shape prevention programs and create more supportive environments for students.

While school climate represents a frequently researched aspect of the school environment, numerous other school-level factors exist. Yet, far fewer studies have examined school characteristics related to bullying than individual characteristics. School-level characteristics beyond the presence of bullying prevention activities have been particularly neglected. In part, this is because few datasets of appropriate size and power exist to rigorously examine multilevel data. Where these multilevel studies exist, they have been instructive. For example, Bradshaw et al. (2009) examined indicators of disorganization at the school level as predictors of bullying involvement in middle schools. After controlling for individual sociodemographic covariates, school-level characteristics such as larger student-teacher ratio, greater proportion of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, and suburban location were associated with higher odds of bullying victimization. Higher rates of student suspension and free and reduced-price lunch receipt were associated with increased odds of perpetration. Studies using this method clearly demonstrate the relevance of the school environment to peer harassment, but examination of a wider variety of school-level risk and protective factors is necessary.

Protective factors against peer harassment have been gaining traction in research and practice at the individual level. For example, many schools focus on improving students' individual skills through social-emotional learning and character education programs. In fact, students' internal assets can function as a powerful protective factor at the individual level for youth and are related to lower levels of bullying involvement in cross-sectional surveys (Harlow and Roberts, 2010). Given associations between these attributes and bullying involvement at the individual level, it is possible that attending a school with a high or low proportion of students with strong internal assets may also impact the amount of bullying an individual student in that school would experience. In part, this may be due to the way many students with high or low internal assets influence school climate and the broader school context. Similarly, the proportion of students in a school with bullying-related risk factors, such as feeling unsafe at school or being the recipient of disciplinary action may be important school-level contextual predictors of individual bullying involvement (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Glew et al., 2008). Identifying a diverse set of key risk and protective factors at the school level associated with specific types of bullying and prejudice-based harassment will allow for targeted school-wide prevention and intervention strategies.

This study examines associations between school-level risk and protective factors and student-level peer harassment experiences, while taking into account individual sociodemographic covariates. Based on past research linking measures of key risk and protective factors at the individual level with reduced involvement in bullying, harassment, and violence, we focus on how these five factors may operate at the school level: academic orientation (Child Trends, n.d.; Eisenberg et al., 2003), internal assets (Harlow and Roberts, 2010), supportive teacher–student relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2003), discipline problems (Bradshaw et al., 2009), and feeling unsafe at school (Glew et al., 2008). We hypothesized that students who attended schools with a higher proportion of students reporting key protective factors (academic orientation, internal assets, and supportive teacher–student relationships) would report less peer harassment perpetration and victimization. In contrast, we expected that students who attended schools with more classmates who reported feeling unsafe at school or were involved in disciplinary activity would report greater involvement in peer harassment perpetration and victimization. We examined the effects of these school contextual predictors on victimization and perpetration of a wide range of peer harassment experiences, including relational, physical, and cyberbullying and prejudice-based harassment.

1. Methods

1.1. Sample and data source

Data for this study come from the 2013 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS; Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team, 2013), a population-based survey distributed to 5th, 8th, 9th, and 11th grade students in the state of Minnesota. Data from public and charter (tuition-free, independent public schools operated jointly by licensed teachers, parents, and community members; MN Association of Charter Schools, 2015) schools were used here. Surveys from Alternative Learning Centers and Juvenile Correctional Facilities were not included because school climate operates differently in these environments. The MSS assesses a wide range of health behaviors and associated risk and protective factors and is administered every three years. Eighty-four percent of school districts ($n = 280$) in the state participated, and 67% of students responded ($N = 162{,}034$). Schools were offered the option to administer the survey on paper (65%) or computer (35%); however the survey was identical across formats. The 5th grade version of the survey was shortened and did not include several questions relevant to these analyses; therefore 5th graders were dropped. Very small schools with less than 20 students who completed surveys were also excluded to avoid aggregation bias. The final analytic sample consisted of 122,180 students nested in 505

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