

How Do Schools Identify Bullying?



The negative effects of bullying on students' physical health, psychological well-being, and academic achievement have prompted the federal government to encourage schools and states to take action to address school bullying¹. Such national efforts to reduce bullying have included encouraging state bullying prevention policies and the creating of anti-bullying programs in schools^{2,3}. Yet, a major barrier to effectively addressing bullying in the school setting is the lack of consensus of a definition of bullying^{4,5}.

In order to implement appropriate bullying interventions in the school setting, it is imperative to first assess the prevalence of bullying behaviors at school. The literature has identified many methods to assess school bullying. However, we know very little about what measures and methods schools use to identify bullying.

One objective of the Professional Practices Related to Bullying study was to identify the assessment practices of school counselors and school psychologists in identifying bullying. We were not only interested in identifying specific measures and strategies that school psychologists and school counselors use to address bullying, but also the training they receive on these topics.

Study Design

We asked 602 school psychologists and school counselors across the United States to report on their roles in addressing bullying, the type of training they received related to bullying, their school and state's policies related to bullying, and the assessment practices they use to identify bullying via an anonymous online survey.

Major Findings⁶

Anti-bullying Laws and School Policies

- The majority of school psychologists and counselors worked in states that had anti-bullying laws and policies for documenting bullying incidents.

Bullying Prevalence and Notification

- Relational and verbal bullying were reported as the most common forms of bullying students experienced.
- Investigation of the specific types of verbal bullying most reported were derogatory comments regarding students':
 - Physical Appearance (most frequent)*
 - Race/Ethnicity*
 - Sexual Orientation or student's sexuality*
 - Disability Status*
- School counselors were more likely to be notified (i.e., weekly or twice a week), about bullying than were school psychologists (i.e., informed monthly).

Bullying Assessment

- The majority of the school practitioners reported to receive training on bullying, with more counselors reporting training in this area than school psychologists.
- Training components were more likely to address types of bullying as well as the consequences for those who were involved.
- Approximately half of the practitioners surveyed reported feeling competent in assessing bullying with more school psychologists feeling competent than school psychologists.
- More counselors reported to be involved in bullying assessments than school psychologists.
- Few practitioners reported using evidenced based rating scales to assess bullying.

Conclusions and Implications

Bullying continues to be a national concern, resulting in a push for schools to take action. An important precursor to intervention efforts is the assessment of bullying involvement. Currently, school practitioners are offered limited guidance surrounding the best methods to assess bullying and victimization.

Research is limited regarding the best methods for assessing bullying behaviors, especially the assessment tools that are evidenced-based and have adequate psychometric properties⁷.

However, the current study indicates that most school practitioners make attempts to address bullying by using best practices (i.e., using multiple measures of assessments).

We found that school-based mental health practitioners are aware of the types of bullying incidents (predominately relational and verbal) at school and are often notified by school staff, students, or parents. Additionally, most school practitioners are trained in bullying, but limited training focuses on assessing bullying and victimization.

Finally, the frequent notification of bullying incidents to school counselors instead of school psychologists give rise to the need of school counselors to receive adequate training in addressing bullying. These findings also suggest that school psychologists may want to reframe their role from bullying interventionists to consultants.

Using their expertise in psychological assessment and psychometrics, school psychologists are in the best position to serve as consultants to school counselors and school staff by selecting the best assessment measures and applying the results of the bullying assessments to identify the most effective interventions to reduce bullying.

Contributions

Dr. Jamilia Blake served as the primary investigator for this study. Additional contributions were made by a number of members of the Peer Relations and Adjustment Lab. We would like to thank Alicia Darenbourg, Brenda A. Gamez, and Lauren McLean for their assistance with participant recruitment and the early development of measures for this study

Disclosures

Portions of this research were presented at the National Association of School Psychology annual convention and Texas Association of School Psychologists annual conference. Portions of this research are also currently under review.

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