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To Bully-Proof or Not to Bully-Proof: That Is the Question

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Abstract

In an effort to prevent tragic incidents like Columbine from recurring, bully-proofing programs are being implemented with the premise that bullies should be identified and an intervention program administered while victims are taught to defend themselves against bullies. However, our survey of middle school students showed that youth could be both bullies and victims at the same time and under variable conditions. The research results call into question the likelihood of success in bully-proofing programs. Instead, the results suggest that promoting positive youth development programs and creating a sense of safety in schools and neighborhoods may be more effective approaches.

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Introduction

Since the tragic Columbine school shootings, many programs have been created to prevent such incidents from recurring (e.g., Trent, Bai, Glick, Annin, & Keene-Osborn, 1999). The most popular response is the institution of "bully-proofing" programs in schools (e.g., Kanan, Nicoletti, Porter, 2000). Programs are based on the assumption that in school, youth are either bullies or victims. It is further assumed that if we identify all the bullies and provide intervention services, we will prevent a repeat of the Columbine school shooting.

Using a psycho-social theory of development (Erikson, 1950), where the focus of adolescence is identity formation, we hypothesize that it is possible for youth to be both a bully and victim as part of their developmental process (Ma, 2001). Second, a youth could have been bullied, and, in response, he/she would bully others. Both could have implications in the way we intervene and design our youth violence prevention programs. In the study discussed here, we examined the relationship between a youth's sense of safety and bullying and victimizing behaviors.

Methods

Participants

We surveyed youth in three middle schools in a diverse urban city in California.

- Questionnaires were administered to 3542 students; 1137 (45%) were completed and returned.
- The majority of the youth were ages 14 (29%), 13 (31%), 12 (28%), and 11 (12%).
- Fifty-seven percent were females; 43% were males.
- Ethnically, 35% identified as African-American, 36% as Hispanic/Latino, 13% as Asian, 12% Mixed/Other, 2% American Indian, 1% Pacific Islander, and 1% White non-Hispanic.

- School grade level showed that 36% were in eighth grade, 29% in seventh grade, and 35% in sixth grade.
- Youth self-reported most frequently received letter grades were A's (22%), B's (39%), C's (32%), D's (5%), and F's (2%).

Measurements

The questionnaire was anonymous and confidential. It was translated into Spanish and Vietnamese. Teachers administered the questionnaire during a class period at the respective middle schools. To allow for national and state comparisons, we used highly reliable and valid questionnaire items from the National Youth Risk and Behavior Survey and the California Healthy Kids survey. For the purposes of this article, we focus on whether the middle school youth engaged in the following behaviors within the past 12 months:

- School perpetrator/bully behaviors (been in a physical fight, used a weapon to threaten or bully someone, sold drugs to someone, been arrested by the police or sheriff)
- School victimization (been offered, sold or given illegal drugs, been teased or "picked on" because of your race, gender, disability, been threatened or injured with a weapon, had things stolen or deliberately damaged)
- Safety issues (how safe do you feel in school, how safe do you feel in your neighborhood).

Results

Frequencies

In response to the perpetrator or bullying questions, 36% of the youth reported having been in a physical fight; 9% used a weapon to threaten someone; 6% sold drugs; and 11% had been arrested in school at least once during the past year (Table 1). In answer to the victimization questions, about 20% of the youth reported they were offered, sold, or given drugs at least once in school during the past year. Also within the past year and occurring at least once, 24% had been teased because of their race; 10% had been threatened with a weapon; and 29% had property stolen.

Table 1.
Percentage Distribution of Youth Perpetrator and Victim Behaviors

In the past 12 months, at school, have you . . .	0 times (%)	1 time (%)	2-3 times (%)	4+ times (%)
Been in a physical fight?	64.3	16.8	10.8	8.3
Used a weapon to threaten someone?	91.0	3.9	1.8	3.2
Sold drugs?	94.0	2.9	1.5	2.6
Been arrested?	89.0	5.4	2.4	3.2
Been offered, sold, given drugs?	80.2	9.1	4.5	6.2
Been teased because of race?	76.0	9.0	6.3	8.7
Been threatened with a weapon?	89.9	5.4	2.4	2.3
Had things stolen or damaged?	71.1	15.4	7.6	5.9

When asked about sense of safety, approximately 84% of the middle school youth reported feeling very safe or safe in their neighborhoods, while approximately 16% felt unsafe or very unsafe (Table 2). Further, about 70% reported feeling very safe or safe while at school, while 30% reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe. This suggests that youth felt safer in their neighborhoods than in their schools.

Table 2.
Percentage Distribution of Feeling Safe For Middle School Students

	Very Safe (%)	Safe (%)	Unsafe (%)	Very Unsafe (%)
How safe do you feel in your neighborhood?	29.4	54.3	12.3	4.0
How safe do you feel in your school?	13.2	56.5	22.1	8.3

Bivariate

Using t-tests, we found significant gender differences in the perpetrator behaviors (Table 3). On average, boys were more likely to be involved in perpetrator behaviors (fighting, using a weapon, selling drugs, being arrested) than girls (1.65 vs. 1.54) were. But note that we also found no significant gender differences in victimization and safety issues. Despite their perpetrator behaviors, the boys were just as likely to be victimized as girls and were no more likely to feel safe than girls were.

Table 3.
T-tests for Perpetrator, Victimization, and Safety issues by Gender

	M	SD	t	df
Been in a physical fight				
Male	1.65	1.00		
Female	1.54	.90	-2.01*	1137
Used a weapon				
Male	1.20	.67		
Female	1.09	.44	-3.59***	1137
Sold drugs				
Male	1.15	.58		
Female	1.09	.47	-2.11*	1137
Been arrested				
Male	1.25	.72		
Female	1.10	.45	-4.27***	1137
Been offered, sold, or given drugs				

Male	1.38	.86		
Female	1.31	.77	-1.30	1137
Been teased because of race, gender, etc.				
Male	1.41	.90		
Female	1.49	.96	1.42	1137
Been threatened with a weapon				
Male	1.15	.55		
Female	1.12	.48	-1.23	1137
Had property stolen or damaged				
Male	1.41	.82		
Female	1.48	.86	1.26	1137
Neighborhood safety				
Male	3.13	.77		
Female	3.06	.72	-1.65	1137
School safety				
Male	2.76	.83		
Female	2.76	.72	-.016	1137
2-tailed significance: *p <= .05; **p <= .01; ***p <= .001				

Further, the perpetrator/bully variables were significantly correlated (Table 4). Youth who had been in a physical fight were more likely to use a weapon ($r = .35$, $p <= .01$), sell drugs ($r = .28$, $p <= .01$), and have been arrested ($r = .33$, $p <= .01$) than those who had not been in a fight. Of note is that youth who had been arrested were more likely to have used a weapon ($r = .54$, $p <= .01$) and sold drugs ($r = .65$, $p <= .01$) than those not arrested.

The victimization variables were also significantly correlated. Youth who were offered or sold drugs were more likely to have been teased ($r = .20$, $p <= .01$), threatened with a weapon ($r = .38$, $p <= .01$), or had property stolen ($r = .21$, $p <= .01$) from them.

Interestingly, there were also significant relationships between the perpetrator/bully variables and victimization variables. For example, youth who had been arrested were more likely to have been offered or sold drugs ($r = .34$, $p <= .01$), teased ($r = .13$, $p <= .01$), threatened ($r = .41$, $p <= .01$), and had property stolen ($r = .22$, $p <= .01$). On the other hand, youth threatened with a weapon were more likely to have been in a physical fight ($r = .33$, $p <= .01$), used a weapon ($r = .50$, $p <= .01$), sold drugs ($r = .46$, $p <= .01$), and been arrested ($r = .41$, $p <= .01$).

School safety was significantly correlated with neighborhood safety ($r = .26$, $p <= .01$). Also note that both school safety and neighborhood safety were negatively correlated with all the youth

Table 4.

Correlation Matrix for the Perpetrator, Victimization and Safety Issues for Middle School Youth

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Been in a physical fight	.35**	.28**	.33**	.33**	.23**	.33**	.32**	-.13**	-.15**
2. Used a weapon		.53**	.54**	.41**	.19**	.50**	.32**	-.12**	-.19**
3. Sold drugs			.65**	.40**	.13**	.46**	.24**	-.11**	-.13**
4. Been arrested				.34**	.13**	.41**	.22**	-.10**	-.12**
5. Been offered, sold, or given drugs					.20**	.38**	.21**	-.15**	-.18**
6. Been teased because of race, gender, etc.						.33**	.38**	-.15**	-.24**
7. Been threatened with a weapon							.42**	-.15**	-.22**
8. Had property stolen or damaged								-.20**	-.22**
9. Neighborhood safety									.26**
10. School safety									
**2-tailed significance: p <= .01									

Conclusion

We hypothesized that a youth could be a bully and a victim as part of the developmental process. The correlation analyses indicate that there is indeed a significant relationship suggesting that a youth can be a bully and a victim in a continual cycle. This finding lends support to the notion that adolescent youth, in the process of the struggle between social/cultural issues and the individual, may exhibit both bully and victim behaviors.

In addition, the data suggests that adolescent bully and victim behaviors may be coping responses to the youth's lack of a sense of safety. It is interesting to note that school and neighborhood safety were negatively correlated with all the youth perpetrator and victim behaviors. Perpetrators do not feel any safer than their victims do. It is most likely because they know their victims may retaliate.

Implications for Programs

Both findings have distinct programmatic implications. The first finding implies that programs that simply label youth as victims or bullies and then seek to "fix" the bullies will not work. Depending on the situation, both behaviors may be exhibited by the same youth. A more effective approach may be to monitor the youth's development (e.g., process of youth identity formation) over time and across incidents. The focus should be supporting and providing youth with positive youth development activities that allow them to try out a variety of roles and challenge norms without the use of bullying behaviors.

The second finding indicates that programs that focus on youth bully and youth victimization may not be effective. Instead, we suggest that programs should focus on increasing all youth's sense of safety because sense of safety decreased both youth perpetrator/bully behaviors and victimization behaviors.

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