ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Given that adolescent bullying victimization is a significant concern for secondary education and adolescent development, identifying school contexts in which victimization is most likely to occur is salient.

METHODS: An anonymous online survey assessed the prevalence of being harassed or bullied in various locations within 20 middle schools (grades 5-9) in New Jersey and New York (N = 10,668). Seven types of bullying-related victimization (teased in an unfriendly way, called hurtful names, physically abused, excluded from a group to hurt feelings, belongings taken/damaged, threatened to be hurt, and negative rumors spread) were examined in 7 locations where each type of victimization could occur (classroom, lunchroom, hallways, gym, playground, bus, or bathroom).

RESULTS: Prevalence of victimization types ranged from 4% to 38% depending on location. Prevalence of overall victimization was equal or greater in classrooms compared with other school locations (highest prevalence rates in hallways, classrooms, and lunchrooms), regardless of school demographic characteristics. Victimization in classrooms compared with other school settings was most highly associated with feelings of being unsafe.

CONCLUSIONS: Vigilant attention to bullying is needed across all school environments and especially in the classroom context, which may mistakenly be perceived as a more protected area. Indeed, middle school classrooms are not safe havens.

Keywords: bullying; bullying locations; middle school; adolescents; victimization.

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Increasing attention to bullying incidents, school shootings, and school climates has precipitated a surge in research studies to establish the actual prevalence of incidents, identify individual characteristics of bullies, victims, and bystanders, explore social factors associated with bullying, and highlight characteristics of school features and school climates associated with bullying. Moreover, many studies have identified the short-term and long-term negative physical and mental health consequences of bullying victimization for students. Less well-studied are the locations where victims of bullying and harassment by students occur in school environments. Studies with data collected before 2000 tend to indicate that bullying generally took place in unstructured spaces. Among primary school students, bullying mainly occurred in the playground, whereas older students reported an increasing prevalence of bullying in classrooms and hallways. Across 23 primary and secondary schools in Britain in 1992, bullying in general occurred most often in the playground, especially among primary school students. Indirect bullying was more likely to occur in the classroom, however, than direct verbal or direct physical bullying. A report on youth bullying provided by the American Medical Association indicated common bullying locations included classrooms as well as the playground (for younger students), lunchroom, and hallways.

More than a decade later, a study examining “unstructured” venues for bullying behaviors among 138 sixth graders in Georgia showed that bullying events took place most often in the cafeteria, followed by the locker room/hallway, and least often at school dances. Moreover, the authors found that the...
number of adults present in each of the venues was not associated with prevalence of bullying behaviors. A qualitative study examining perceptions of bullying among Greek adolescents found that students first reported bullying happening everywhere but added that it happens more often in unsupervised places.27 Finally, among a large cohort of Canadian youth in grades 4-12, areas that were not well supervised by school personnel were generally identified as unsafe.28 Specifically, this study showed that elementary students who experienced bullying emphasized the playground and recess time as particularly dangerous, whereas high school students involved in bullying noted hallways, the cafeteria, and outside recess as hazardous. Similarly, results from a large study of elementary to high school students in 1 district in the United States indicated substantial grade differences in reports of bullying locations in terms of both personal victimization and perceptions of others’ victimization experiences.29

The lack of systematic and comprehensive information regarding (1) which types of bullying behaviors occur and in what school-related locations, and (2) to what degree being victimized in certain locations is associated with a student’s sense of safety or fear at school present significant knowledge gaps in the youth bullying literature. Therefore, the current study seeks to address the following questions:

1. Within middle school contexts, where do harassment and bullying take place?
2. Do the prevalence, type, frequency of each type, and number of types of victimization vary by location?
3. How do students’ feelings of being unsafe at school vary with location of victimization?

METHODS

Participants

Twenty middle schools (19 located throughout the state of New Jersey and 1 New York school located near the border with New Jersey) chose to participate in an anonymous online survey between 2006 and 2008. The targeted study population was comprised of all students enrolled in these middle schools; 1 school was comprised of grades 5-6, 1 school had grades 5-8, 13 schools included grades 6-8, 4 schools had grades 7-8, and 1 school had grades 7-9. Middle school populations ranged from small (N = 62) to relatively large (N = 1221) with the mean size of school populations being 643. The schools represented a wide range of communities in terms of affluence levels as reflected in the fact that between 1% and 81% of their students were on a free lunch program (23% of the overall participating population). The schools also ranged considerably in the extent of racial diversity with schools reporting 1% to 96% of their students as white (59% on average), 0% to 47% of students as black (20% on average), 1% to 75% as Hispanic (16% on average), and 0% to 41% as Asian (7% on average). The average student-teacher ratio among the schools was 11.4:1 and ranged from 8.1:1 to 18.1:1.

Among the 20 schools, 9 of them conducted the survey in multiple years so that a total of 35 school cohorts were surveyed between 2006 and 2008 and a total of 10,668 surveys were obtained. Response rates from the school cohorts ranged from 11% to 91% with an overall response rate of 52.2%. The data reported in this study represent all of the participating school cohorts, although response rates in a few instances were low. However, we additionally conducted the same analyses as reported in this article with only school cohorts where response rates exceeded 50% (averaging 71% response) and also repeated the analyses with only the most recent cohort from participating schools if they participated more than once. In both instances, the same patterns of results emerged as reported using the full database, so we report the results from all of the data here representing the widest range of schools and cohorts.

Boys comprised 48% of the overall sample and girls comprised 52%. The sample’s grade distribution was 36% in grades 5 and 6, 32% in grade 7, and 32% in grades 8 and 9; the overall mean age was 12.6 years. Fifty-two percent were attending a suburban school, 38% were attending a school that drew students from urban and suburban surroundings, and 10% were attending a school in a rural setting. Sixty-one percent of the students in the overall sample were whites, 12% were Asians, 8% were Hispanics/Latinos, 6% were blacks, 2% were American Indians or Alaskan Natives, and 11% indicated “other” for their racial identity.

Instrument

Data were collected using an anonymous online “Survey of Bullying at Your School” that covered a wide range of bullying-related topics and other social and demographic information. The survey was constructed by the authors in consultation with New Jersey Department of Education professional staff who vetted the survey content and gave special attention to face validity of bullying victimization measures. A preliminary paper version of the survey was pretested with focus groups of middle school students who were asked to answer the survey noting any items which were unclear or difficult to read. Adjustments were made in accordance with this student feedback. The resulting instrument contained a total of 77 questions spanning 4 virtual pages online.

Literature on aggression, victimization, harassment, and other forms of negative relationships among
youth often refer to, or directly use, the concept of bullying to describe behaviors and interactions. There are many differing usages of the term “bullying”; some studies use the term “bullying” broadly and equate it with student harassment, whereas others more restrictively define it, often using the Olweus definition that involves repeated actions, purposeful intent of harm, and a power differential between perpetrator and victim. In the survey used for this study, many of the questions ask about harassment behaviors that, although commonly associated with bullying and often done repeatedly, may not have fully met the restrictive definition. We did ask about these measures of harassment in the context of a survey broadly examining the topic of bullying, and we also included some questions that specifically ask about students’ experiences of being “bullied” using that term. Hence, at least subjectively, the study inquires, in part, about bullying victimization but also examines a broader set of harassment behaviors of which students might be victims. Thus, this study ultimately focuses on the prevalence of students’ harassment and bullying victimization experiences and the places in school where any victimization by peers might typically occur.

The survey was introduced with the following sentences: “This is a survey about how students relate to each other. Sometimes students do things that may be called bullying. We want you to tell us about yourself and what you think about other students. You will not be asked to give your name—this is an anonymous survey. Questions that ask about other students are asking about students at your school.” Several sets of questions from the survey were used in the research reported here. Students were initially asked if they had ever done any of several possible things to get away from a bully at school including not go to the bathroom, not go to lunch, pretend to be sick and go home, avoid a class, avoid a hallway, or avoid some other place at school. Next, students were asked how often they had personally skipped school that year because they were afraid of other students hurting or making fun of them (never, once, 2-3 times, or 4 or more times). They were also asked to indicate how safe versus how threatened they felt at school on a 10-point scale from “very safe” (scored as 1) to “very threatened” (scored as 10).

Students were subsequently asked to report if they had experienced any of 7 types of harassment commonly associated with bullying. Specifically, respondents were asked how often in the last 30 days each of the following things had happened to them: (1) pushing, shoving, hitting, kicking, hair pulling, or tripping; (2) teasing in an unfriendly way; (3) being called hurtful names; (4) being excluded from a group to hurt feelings; (5) belongings being taken or damaged; (6) unkind story or rumor spread; and (7) threatened to be hurt. The content of these questions was based on instruments used in several previous studies to measure the prevalence of different types of bullying and victimization behaviors. The response options were “not in the last 30 days,” “once,” “2-3 times,” and “4 or more times.” Students were then asked to indicate whether or not each of these things had ever happened to them during the school year in 7 specific locations within the school context. The places listed on the survey were (1) playground, (2) lunchroom, (3) classroom, (4) gym, (5) hallways, (6) bathroom, and (7) bus. An index for each of the 7 contexts was subsequently created by summing the total number of ways (0 to 7) in which a student may have ever experienced victimization in that context during the school year. Strong internal reliability for each of the 7 indices (based on 7 types of victimization) was confirmed by computing Cronbach alpha for each index. Cronbach alpha ranged between 0.78 and 0.87 for the 7 indices, thereby demonstrating high internal reliability for the number of ways victimized in each context. Students were also asked to self-report their sex, age, and race/ethnicity with choices including American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, white/Caucasian, and Other.

**Procedure**

From class sessions or other group assignments in school, students who had parental consent were instructed to go in groups to rooms where a computer was available for each student. Each group was given general information about the online survey and told that the survey was voluntary and anonymous. A student could leave any or all questions blank if they did not want to participate. No personal computing accounts were used. To access the survey, all students in a specific group session were publicly given the same password and URL address to assure students of their anonymity in completing the survey. However, the password was changed between sessions so that no student could access the survey and submit multiple responses after leaving his or her survey session. There was a teacher or other adult monitor present simply to make sure that students did not speak with each other while taking the survey. The survey data were subsequently checked to screen out submissions with intentionally provided erroneous or random answers. The small number of respondents who submitted multiple answers that were clearly outside of possible ranges or who answered sets of questions with contradictory responses was eliminated. The average time taken to complete the survey by middle school students in this study was 13 minutes (SD = 4.4 minutes) with 95% of respondents completing this survey within a time range of 7 to 24 minutes.
Data Analysis

Prevalence rates for overall victimization experiences are reported along with prevalence of strategies used to avoid being harassed or bullied. Prevalence and frequency measures of victimization are also examined by type, by location, and by sex. Prevalence of each type of victimization was also examined by location within specific school categories distinguished by population size, student-teacher ratio, percent of the student body that was white versus minority, and the percent of the school population that received a free school lunch. The mean number of ways bullied (number of different types of victimization) in each school context is also computed by sex and for all students and for victims only. Finally, linear regression analysis stratified by gender is employed to predict students' feelings of being unsafe based on the number of ways students had been harassed or bullied in each school location and controlling for age, race, and school-specific effects.

RESULTS

Many students in these middle schools reported being the victim of behaviors that are commonly associated with bullying (combining all 7 types of victimization). Furthermore, during the current year, 25% had skipped recess, had not gone to the bathroom or lunch, had pretended to be sick and went home, or had avoided a class, hallway, or some other place at school to get away from a bully. Eight percent reported having skipped school at least once due to fear of others during the school year.

Figure 1 presents the prevalence and frequency of reports of each type of victimization. Being teased or called hurtful names was experienced by half of all students (equally for boys and girls), and one fourth experienced these actions by peers multiple times in the last 30 days. Half of all boys and over 40% of girls reported being physically abused, and 20% of all students reported multiple incidents in the last 30 days. Over one fourth of both girls and boys had belongings taken from them during that time period as well.

Figure 2 presents the prevalence of each type of victimization reported by students according to the places it occurred. Prevalence of victimization types ranged from 4% to 38% depending on location. This figure clearly demonstrates that no type of victimization occurs exclusively in any of the locations of school life examined in this study. All types of victimization can be found in all locations, and those types of victimization that are more prevalent in general tend to be more prevalent across locations.
The only notable variation from this pattern occurs in regard to the prevalence of physical abuse which is relatively less prevalent in the classroom compared with most other types of victimization and far more prevalent than all other types in the school hallways.

Figure 3 uses the indices of total types of victimization (number of ways victimized) in each location. The first part of the figure reports the prevalence of any victimization in each of the various school-related locations. The second part shows the mean number of ways victimized (from none to all 7 types of victimization) in each location and the mean number of ways victimized in each location among only those who were victims in the specific location (i.e., mean ways victimized in a location among those who were harassed or bullied in at least 1 way). Hallways are the most problematic areas for girls and boys in terms of both the prevalence of any victimization and the number of ways that victimization is taking place in this setting. Classrooms and lunchrooms follow closely behind hallways as areas where much victimization takes place. Indeed, half of all girls and almost half of boys note the classroom as problematic. Nonetheless, regardless of the particular school setting, among those who have been harassed or bullied in a specific location, they report being victims of multiple types of harassment or bullying in each situation. Specifically, victims in each location reported having experienced between 2 and 3 types of victimization, on average, in that setting. Similar to Figure 3a, Figure 4 shows that the prevalence of victimization during the school year is greatest in classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms, regardless of school characteristics examined. Specifically, schools were divided into 3 groups for each characteristic examined including population size, student-teacher ratio, percent of the student body that was white versus minority, and the percent of the school population that received a free school lunch. Thus, the pattern of pervasive victimization does not alter by these contextual factors with the exception of some notable variation for playground victimization. This exception might be explained by the extent and availability of different playground spaces and facilities where students spend more or less time.

As a final step, this research investigated predictors of the degree to which students felt unsafe at school using their responses to the 10-point scale from very safe (1) to very threatened (10). The mean score was 2.11 (SD = 2.03). Although most students (86%) felt relatively safe (choosing between 1 and 5), 16% tended to feel mostly or very threatened (choosing between 6 and 10). Linear multiple regression analysis revealed that students’ scores for this measure of feeling unsafe were predicted by the number of ways students were victimized that had occurred in each school location (Table 1). Age and race (white vs minority) were entered as simultaneous predictors along with dummy variables representing each school to control for school-specific effects. The analysis was conducted separately for girls and boys. Among girls, being harassed or bullied in an increasing number of ways in the classroom, in hallways, and in the gym along with increasing age predicted greater feelings of being unsafe. Being harassed or bullied in other areas...
produced less concern about one’s safety. Similarly, being victimized in an increasing number of ways in the classroom, in hallways, and in the gym were also the greatest causes of concern among boys. Unlike the predictors for girls, being victimized on the bus was also statistically significant and age was not predictive. Comparing the size of the standardized coefficients, the number of ways victimized in the classroom was the strongest predictor of feeling unsafe and equally so for girls and boys.

**DISCUSSION**

This study clearly shows that all types of harassment and bullying victimization occur across both unstructured and structured spaces within the school context regardless of whether these locations are supervised. It suggests that, no matter where students or school personnel are located, many students not only experience various types of victimization but are also likely to witness incidents. It is of serious concern that the most dangerous areas in terms of both prevalence of any victimization and the number of different ways that it takes place—those being hallways, classrooms, and lunchrooms—represent the 3 areas where schools often have (or at least are supposed to have) significant and constant monitoring procedures (classrooms and lunchrooms) or regulations (along with some monitoring) about who can be in that space at any given time (hallways). This suggests that frequent bullying and victimization will occur even when there is contextually authoritative oversight supposedly in place. Perhaps, the types of harassment and bullying that occur more often in these school locations are not as visually overt as other types that may be observed in less monitored settings. Nonetheless, they may be equally or more important in reducing students’ sense of safety and well-being while at school.

**Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, the database represents only middle schools from the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. It, nonetheless, reflects a broad diversity of schools based on socioeconomic conditions, type of location, and racial makeup. Second, the data are based on self-reported incidents of harassment and bullying victimization, which may introduce recall error and some suppression of reporting negative experiences.
that may be uncomfortable to admit. The survey was anonymous, however, and moreover, students were probably much less likely to refrain purposely from telling the truth about the locations in which they have been victimized than if they had been reporting on where they were bullying others. Third, the data are cross-sectional in nature, and thus no causal effect can be definitively established from the association presented in the predictive analysis here as the phenomena of victimization and personal fear may be spuriously correlated in some way or to some degree. It is, nevertheless, certainly much more plausible that victimization (and victimization in the classroom in particular as noted) generates feelings of being unsafe rather than presuming the opposite direction of effect.

Finally, it must be noted that this study is only about types and extent of victimization occurring specifically in various school-related physical locations. It does not include the hurtful use of electronic media or “cyberbullying,” admittedly a large and growing area of virtual landscape where students may be bullied and have their well-being threatened during school hours, as well as at other times and in other places.34,35

Conclusions

Amid these limitations, the fundamental point of this research remains—that bullying in school environments occurs in a wide variety of contexts—and notably within the classroom as well as other areas that are thought to be highly supervised. The
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

Overall, this article demonstrates the imperative for schools to increase their vigilance about bullying as there appears to be no safe haven throughout the school environment. Thus, a high priority should be the implementation of programs with demonstrated effectiveness in schools to reduce bullying, increase bystander intervention, and promote positive social environments. Indeed, the research clearly illustrates the critical need for trying new approaches to reduce what appears to be an omnipresent problem throughout the student’s school experience.40

Crucially, the potential for significant negative effects due to classroom bullying should not be ignored. Research commonly suggests that the experience of being bullied in school produces students who are disengaged from pursuing their education.41 This disengagement may not simply come from their experiences of peer abuse somewhere on school property outside of the learning environment. The academic alienation produced by the experience of being bullied may come much more directly in many instances from what students experience in the classroom than what has been commonly thought to be the case. When bullying occurs in such a salient academic space with an authority figure and peers within close range, it may be even more embarrassing and hurtful, making students feel even more unsafe because it occurs in a place where students should least commonly expect to be bullied. This study suggests that the mere presence of teachers in the classroom serving as authority figures does not provide the influence necessary to lower the incidences of harassment and bullying in that context compared with other school locations. Thus, it is of utmost importance to address classroom harassment bullying along with such behaviors in less monitored contexts. Learning as well as healthy emotional development in general may be severely impaired by students’ fear of being victimized during class time and by their reluctance to attend class due to this fear of being unsafe.

This research also demonstrates the importance of school personnel being vigilantly attentive to the many forms of bullying that may take place in each location associated with student life rather than simply focusing on a particular problem behavior assumed to be most common in a specific school context. A number of resources for taking action in schools have recently appeared. For example, Masiello and Schroeder42 provide a collection of perspectives and suggestions for more aggressive engagement of teachers and other school staff in addressing the problem in school environments. Parents, teachers, and school administrators cannot assume that any location at school is a safe haven just because it is presumed to be under professional supervision.

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Human Subjects Approval Statement

Review and approval of the survey instrument and research procedures were provided by the Institutional Review Board at the first author’s institution.

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No Safe Haven: Locations of Harassment and Bullying Victimization in Middle Schools

1. Which researchers found that the number of adults present in certain school venues was not associated with prevalence of bullying behaviors in those places?

   b. Bradshaw and Sawyer (2007)
   c. Parault et al. (2007)
   d. Vaillancourt et al. (2010)

2. Which of the following does not correctly reflect the demographics of the study participants?

   a. Approximately 20% were attending a school in a rural setting.
   b. The majority of participants were Caucasian.
   c. The mean age was 12.6 years.
   d. There were slightly more girls than boys.

3. Which of the following reflects methods for instrument development?

   a. A paper version of the survey was pretested with focus groups of middle school students.
   b. Modifications were made to the survey based upon student feedback from a pilot test.
   c. The authors consulted with New Jersey Department of Education staff.
   d. All of the above

4. What was the average number of minutes students took to complete the survey?

   a. 13
   b. 18
   c. 27
   d. 36

5. Study results showed that in the last 30 days, approximately how many of the students had been the victim of multiple victimization incidents commonly associated with bullying?

   a. 1/2
   b. 1/3
   c. 2/3
   d. 3/4

6. Which of the following types of victimization was found to be more prevalent among girls than boys?

   a. Belongings Taken/Damaged
   b. Called Hurtful Names
   c. Teased
   d. Unkind Rumors Spread About You
7. Which type of victimization was found to be more prevalent than all other types of victimization in school hallways?
   a. Called Hurtful Names
   b. Physical Abuse
   c. Teased
   d. Threatened to be Hurt

8. In terms of predictors of the degree to which students felt unsafe at school, boys and girls differed in which way?
   a. Being victimized in the classroom, hallways, and gym were the greatest causes of concern among boys, but not girls.
   b. Being victimized on the bus was statistically significant for boys, but not girls.
   c. The number of ways victimized in the classroom was the strongest predictor of feeling unsafe among boys, but not girls.
   d. None of the above

9. Study limitations include all of the following except:
   a. data are cross-sectional and thus no causal effect can be established.
   b. data from self-reported incidents of harassment and bullying may be subject to recall error or reflect suppression of negative experiences.
   c. participating schools were not very diverse in terms of socioeconomic conditions, location, and racial makeup.
   d. the study did not include cyberbullying.

10. Whose resource is designed to help teachers and school staff more aggressively address bullying in school environments?
    b. Masiello and Schroeder (2014)
    c. Schroeder et al. (2011)
Continuing Education Answer Sheet December 2014 (Event 01110)
Circle one per question:

1. A B C D 6. A B C D
2. A B C D 7. A B C D
3. A B C D 8. A B C D
5. A B C D 10. A B C D

Instructions
- Circle the answers on the Answer Sheet. Retain the test questions as your record.
- Complete the Evaluation, check type of continuing education, and fill out Applicant Information in the space provided.
- 70% constitutes a passing score.
- Please allow 4-6 weeks for processing. For recertification purposes, the date that contact hours are awarded will reflect the date of processing.
- Return the Answer Sheet to: Continuing Education Manager, American School Health Association, 7918 Jones Branch Drive, Suite 300, McLean, VA 22102 or email scanned sheets to Ashley Dowling, adowling@ashaweb.org.

Objectives
Learners should be able to: 1) Describe the study; 2) Identify lessons learned from the study; 3) Determine whether the lessons learned apply to their practice; 4) Utilize relevant lessons learned to improve their practice. (Event 01110)

Evaluation Please circle rating from 1- Disagree to 5 - Agree
1. The stated objectives were met. 1 2 3 4 5
2. The content was related to the objectives. 1 2 3 4 5
3. The content was clearly written. 1 2 3 4 5
4. The test questions were clearly written. 1 2 3 4 5
5. The content was related to my practice needs. 1 2 3 4 5
6. The module was easy to access and use. 1 2 3 4 5
7. Time it took to review the article and take the test: _______ minutes.

Check box for continuing education hour, or none for general hour:
☐ 1.0 CECH, Category I ☐ 1.0 CNE Contact Hour

Full Name ☐ ASHA Member ☐ Non-member
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