

A Survey of Bullying in Singapore Secondary Schools

As part of an anti-bullying initiative by the Singapore Children's Society, a survey of secondary school students was conducted by the Society in 2006. The aim was to examine the prevalence of the various forms of bullying behaviours experienced by our secondary school students, the effects bullying had on them, the sources of support these victims turned to, and their perceived effectiveness. A profile of these victims and their bullies, and of self-admitted bullies, was also created. The findings were examined in relation to gender, ethnicity, and educational levels.

Methods and sampling

A quantitative questionnaire was designed by the Singapore Children's Society based on literature review and the experiences of staff working with children and youths who were victims of bullying. Pilot tests were conducted to ensure the respondents could understand the questions and that the interview was not too long.

Youths nationwide who attended a local secondary school the year before were invited by trained interviewers to take part in this one-to-one interview at home. Altogether, 513 secondary school students aged 14 to (exceptionally) 20 years old- with a mean age of 15.2 years- took part in this survey. The households were randomly chosen from the local Yellow Pages Residential Listings 2005/06 and respondents were stratified by gender, ethnicity, and educational level to reflect the Singapore's population distributions as reported by the Singapore Department of Statistics (2006) and the Ministry of Education (2006). Such stratification also avoided biases that could occur if sample selection was limited to certain schools or catchment areas. As this survey was based on a recall of the students' bullying experiences in the previous school year and only pupils from Secondary 2 to 5 at the time of the interview were surveyed, the experiences reported covered Secondary 1 through 4. The experiences of students in Secondary 4 (Express, and Normal Technical) and Secondary 5 were not covered in this study.

The voluntary nature of the study was stressed to the respondents who were also informed they could withdraw participation at any point in the interview. Informed consent from each participant was also obtained before the interview commenced. Each interview took no more than twenty minutes to complete and all interviews were conducted in English (the medium of instruction in Singapore schools).

To examine the prevalence of bullying and the common types of bullying behaviours faced by our students, respondents were presented with a list of common physical, verbal, relational and cyber bullying behaviours and asked to rate how often they experienced each hurtful behaviour on an objective frequency scale. To find out the effects of bullying on these victims, respondents were asked, from a list of common physical, emotional and psychological reactions to bullying, if they have experienced any of those effects. For sources of support, the respondents were asked, from a list of those likely to help, whether they approached any of them, and how effective they found those sources of help to be. They were also asked to provide some demographic details of their bullies, if known, including gender, ethnicity and educational level. If the respondent was bullied by more than one person, he or she was asked to describe the bully he or she was most affected by. Finally, they were also asked if they themselves engaged in any bullying behaviours.

Summary of key findings

Results found that approximately 1 in 4 secondary school students surveyed was a victim of bullying, defined as any action apparently intended to victimise and repeated at least twice every single month over a span of one school year. Males and females were just as likely to be bullied. There were also more Malay victims compared to the other major ethnic groups. Similar proportions of students reported being bullied at each secondary level. Bullies and their victims tended to be of the same gender, the same ethnic group, and in the same class at school. However, more bullies were boys than girls, and there was a greater tendency for boys to bully girls than for girls to bully boys.

A group of students who was involved in both bullying and being bullied was found in the present study. These bully-victims made up more than half the self-admitted bullies (53%) but they made up less than a quarter of the victims (22%). It is possible that these students could be victims who have certain characteristics that made them react to bullying with aggression, or they could be bullies possessing qualities that provoke other bullies, although it is not clear in the present study which group these bully-victims belong to. Nevertheless, more than half of them did admit to bullying someone before they themselves were bullied (64%).

Girls experienced more relational bullying like rumour spreading than boys. Cyber bullying behaviours were least common among the various forms of bullying behaviours surveyed. The usage of vulgarities on the victims followed by hurtful name calling was most prevalent. This is a cause for concern because people with the mentality of "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" often fail to realise that in reality words can be no less damaging to people on the receiving end.

Feelings of anger and sadness were most frequently reported by the victims. More than two-thirds of the victims also took revenge on their bullies while a handful of them bullied others after they themselves were bullied, showing a link between bullying and being bullied. A handful of them also exhibited other destructive behaviours like damaging properties, hurting animals, and even themselves. School performance was also affected for some victims who had difficulty paying attention in class, and a few of them became fearful of going to school or missed days in school altogether as a result of being bullied.

Finally, secondary school students were most inclined to tell their peers about being bullied followed by their teachers, parents, then professional helpers like counsellors and social workers. Ironically, their replies suggested that this latter group of professionals were effective most often when approached while peers were comparatively least effective. However, as we do not know what guided individual youth's choice of confidant, this finding does not necessarily imply that we should encourage them to go to other sources more. In fact, most of these support sources were able to make things better for the victims, and only seldom did they make things worse.

These results obtained in this study give an indication of bullying among secondary school students in Singapore. A similar study has subsequently been conducted for primary school pupils in 2007, and a copy of the research monograph, *Bullying in Singapore Schools*, comparing findings from the two surveys, can be obtained from our Research and Outreach Centre (tel: 6358 0911) or downloaded from the Society's website at <http://www.childrensociety.org.sg>.