



**Bullying in Minnesota Schools:
An analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey, 2010
Brief: Family Characteristics and Environment**

In 2010, the Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) included two questions regarding relational bullying and over 130,000 sixth-, ninth- and twelfth-grade students responded to those questions. The responses were analyzed in relation to other questions regarding risk and protective factors, including experiences of victimization across environments, school factors, community connections and interpersonal relationships, family characteristics and environment, and personal characteristics. This analysis is organized into separate briefs for each category, and includes a literature review, the MSS data, as well as recommendations for bullying prevention and intervention in schools.

The student categories presented in this report are based on the response patterns to these questions:

- *During the last 30 days, how often has another student or group of students made fun of or teased you in a hurtful way, or excluded you from friends or activities?*
- *During the last 30 days, how often have you, on your own or as part of a group, made fun of or teased another student in a hurtful way or excluded another student in from friends or activities?*

Of those students participating, 42.9 percent reported no involvement in bullying. Thirty percent (30.7%) said they had made fun of, teased, or excluded others once or twice in the last month, and 27.2% said they had experienced those things once or twice in the past month, which does not constitute bullying or victimization at this rate.¹ Of those remaining, 12.6 percent were classified as *victims* (were made fun of, teased in a hurtful way, or excluded from friends or activities by others with a frequency of weekly or more), 9.3 percent were classified as *bullies* (engaged in the actions listed above toward victims with a frequency of weekly or more), and 3.1 percent were *bully/victims* (bullied and victimized at least weekly).

Throughout the reports in this series, several findings emerged consistently.

- Students regularly involved in bullying incidents, whether victim, bully or bully/victim (*bullying-involved students*), have high rates of associated experiences, most of them negative.
- The data in these reports indicate that those classified as bullies have been victims of maltreatment themselves, in many cases.
- Nearly half of all students responding had *no* involvement with bullying as a victim or a bully. Across analyses, the “never involved” group had the lowest incidence of risk factors and the highest frequency of protective factors.

Further information regarding the Minnesota Students Survey can be found in the *Brief: Methodology*, and include the definitions of the terms used in all the briefs.

Literature Review

Much research has been dedicated to the parenting styles of youth with bullying experiences (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994; Carney & Merrell, 2001; Curtner-Smith, 2000; Olweus, 1994; Pellegrini, 1998; Roberts, 2000). Families of bullies are often described as stressed, having in home conflict, lack of warmth, and physical punishment (Pellegrini, 1998; Roberts, 2000). Victims’ families have been described as overprotective and conflict-avoidant (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Families of bully/victims are often low in warmth, and sometimes aggressive (Bowers, Smith & Binney, 1994, Pellegrini, 1998; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). The Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) does not include questions regarding parenting styles exactly, but does ask questions that may provide insight into the home environments and parent behaviors.

Family Characteristics: Living Arrangements

The survey inquired about living arrangements by asking students with whom they lived. The answer categories provided an extensive list of options including biological parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, grandparents, foster parents, no adults and other. Students were asked to mark all that applied. Based on the answers provided, students were categorized into the following groups: two-parents (biological mother, biological father, adoptive mother and adoptive father), parent and step-parent (biological mother, stepfather, biological father and stepmother), one parent only (biological mother or biological father), one parent, separately (sometimes mother, sometimes father), other (foster parents, other relatives, grandparents, and other adults ‘I’m not related to.’) or no adult/no answer.

Bullying-involved students—whether victims, bullies or bully/victims—were slightly less likely to report living with two parents and more likely to report living in parent/stepparent, one parent, or other living arrangements than their never-involved counterparts (Table 1).

Table 1. Living Arrangements

	State Average	Never Involved	Victims	Bullies	Bully/Victims
Two-parents	60.9%	64%	53.6%	51.2%	49.8%
Parent and step-parent	6.5%	5.8%	7.7%	8.0%	7.8%
One parent only	18.1%	17.4%	19.8%	23.1%	22.8%
One parent, separately	9.4%	8.0%	12.2%	10.6%	11.3%
Other	4.2%	3.9%	5.1%	5.0%	5.7%
No adults/No answer	1.0%	0.9%	1.6%	2.1%	2.7%

The following table indicates what percentage of students living in each family type reported being victims, bullies, or bully/victims (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of Bullying Involvement Within Family Type

	Never Involved	Victims	Bullies	Bully/Victims
Two-parents	45.8%	11.2%	7.8%	2.5%
Parent and step-parent	39%	15.2%	11.5%	3.8%
One parent only	42.3%	14.0%	11.9%	3.9%
One parent, separately	37.1%	16.4%	10.4%	3.7%
Other	43%	16.2%	11.6%	4.4%
No adults/No answer	40.2%	20.7%	19.1%	8.4%

Given the apparent difference between living with two parents, living with a combination of one parent and/or step parents and other adults, and living with no adults, odds ratios were calculated to determine the magnitude of difference between these groups. This was conducted by dividing the number of victims

by the number of those never victimized or victimized rarely in each group to determine the odds of being a victim (the same calculation was conducted for bullies and bully/victims). Then, groups were compared to students living in a two-parent household to determine the odds of having victim, bully, or bully/victim status depending on household makeup.

Compared to living with two parents, children living with other parental configurations or adults were 1.46 times more likely to be victims, 1.54 times more likely to be bullies, and 1.54 times more likely to be bully/victims. Students who reported living with no adults or giving no answer had the worst odds. Compared to those living with both parents, students living with no adults had a 2.07 times greater chance of being victims, a 2.8 times greater chance of being bullies, and a 3.46 times greater chance of being bully/victims.

Family Environment: Family Members Alcohol and Drug Use

The survey directly asked whether alcohol or drug use by a family member had caused significant family, health, legal or job problems. Bullying-involved students were more likely to report that alcohol or drugs had caused significant problems in their home environment. All of the differences were compared using the Chi-Square test, which indicated that there was a significant association ($p < .001$ in all cases) between bullying involvement and alcohol or drug problems in the home. Students who experience drug or alcohol problems in the home are more likely to be victims, bullies, or bully/victims than are students who do not experience these problems (Table 3).

Table 3. Family Members Alcohol and Drug Use

	State Average	Never Involved	Victims	Bullies	Bully/Victims
Alcohol use	14.2%	10.2%	22.9%	25.2%	30.0%
Drug Use	9.5%	6.2%	16.9%	19.7%	24.6%

In order to examine the relative risk to each gender posed by alcohol or drug use in the family, odds ratios were calculated. These ratios represent the odds of reporting bully, victim, or bully/victim status when also reporting alcohol or drug use in the home. For example, an odds ratio of 2.32 for male victims reporting alcohol use indicates that males who report alcohol problems in their family are 2.32 times more likely to report being a victim than are boys who report no problems with alcohol in the home. The data indicate that alcohol and drug use in the home put students at greater risk, and that the risk is relatively equally distributed to both genders (Table 4).

Table 4. Odds of Bullying Involvement Given Family Drug or Alcohol Problems

	Victims		Bullies		Bully/Victims	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Alcohol use	2.32	2.18	2.73	2.85	3.973	4.09
Drug use	2.60	2.37	3.24	3.33	5.2	4.82

Family Environment: Witness or Victim of Family Violence

The survey also explored the experiences of family violence. Questions were asked regarding the witnessing of family violence (“Has anyone in your family ever hit anyone else in the family so hard or so often that they had marks or were afraid of that person?”), being a victim of family violence (“Has any adult in your household ever hit you so hard or so often that you had marks or were afraid of that person?”), and being a victim of incest (“Has any older/stronger member of your family touched you sexually or had you touch them sexually?”). While in all cases, the number of student who reported

having these experiences was slight, the differences between bullying-involved students and those never involved in bullying created a very different picture of victimization.

Bullying-involved students were three to four times more likely to report witnessing family violence than their never-involved peers. Victims of bullying were approximately three times more likely to report witnessing family violence (23.3% vs. 7.7%, respectively). Bullies were approximately 2.5 times more likely to report witnessing family violence than peers who were never involved in bullying (21.7% vs. 8.6%, respectively). Bully/victims had the greatest rates of difference, where they were 4.3 times more likely to report witnessing family violence than those never involved in bullying (27.8% vs. 6.4%, respectively).

Students who reported regular involvement in bullying incidents also reported being victims of family violence at rates greater than their never-involved peers. Victims were approximately four times more likely than students never involved in bullying to report being a victim of family violence (24.4% vs. 6.0%, respectively). Bullies were three times more likely than never involved students to report the same (21.4% vs. 7.3%, respectively). And again, bully/victims had the greatest difference in reported rates. Six times as many victims of physical violence reported being a bully/victim than those who reported no involvement in bullying.

An even more devastating picture regarding experiences in the family is created when examining the experiences of intra-familial sexual abuse or incest. While the actual number of students who report being a victim of incest was small, the proportion of bullying-involved students who also reported sexual abuse by a family member was great. Bullying-involved students were three to six times more likely to report intra-familial sexual abuse than those never involved in bullying. Three-and-a-half times as many victims (6.1% vs. 1.7%), 3.3 times as many bullies (6.2% vs. 1.9%) and 6.5 times as many bully/victims (9.7% vs. 1.5%, respectively) emerged in the group of students who had experienced intra-familial sexual abuse.

When the differences between the frequency of bully status and violence were compared, all differences were statistically significant according to Chi-Square analyses ($p < .001$ for all comparisons). This indicates that there is a significant association between witnessing or being a victim of violence as well as being a victim of intra-familial sexual abuse and bullying involvement (Table 5).

Table 5. Experience of Family Violence

	State Average	Never Involved	Victims	Bullies	Bully/Victims
Witness to Physical Violence	11.4%	6.4%	23.3%	21.7%	27.8%
Victim of Physical Violence	10.2%	4.9%	24.4%	21.4%	29.6%
Intra-familial sexual abuse	2.6%	1.5%	6.1%	6.2%	9.7%

In general, female students were more likely than their male counterparts to report witnessing or being a victim of family violence. The following table reports the percent of students within each category who reported being a victim, bully or bully/victim. For example, for boys who have witnessed family violence, 29.1% end up being victims of bullying as well (Table 6).

Table 6. Experience of Family Violence by gender

2010 data	State Average		Victims		Bullies		Bully/Victims	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Witness to Physical Violence	9.9%	12.9%	29.1%	23.3%	22.2%	13.8%	10.0%	5.6%
Victim of Physical Violence	9.2%	10.7%	34.1%	27.3%	24.2%	15.2%	12.1%	6.4%
Intra-familial sexual abuse	1.6%	3.5%	38.6%	26.2%	34.1%	16.9%	21.4%	7.0%

Summary

The majority of students in this survey report living with two parents. Bullying-involved students are less likely than those never involved in bullying to report this living arrangement. Most family living situations are relatively comparable in terms of the odds of bullying involvement. Students are most at risk when they reported living with no adults or gave no answer to this question. Students with bullying experiences, regardless of the type, are more likely to report coming from an abusive or unsafe home environment. There is a significant association between witnessing or being a victim of violence in the home as well as being a victim of intra-familial sexual abuse and bullying involvement. Bully/victims appear to experience the highest likelihood of victimization or witnessing violence within the home.

Recommendations

Prevention and intervention

Bullying is best prevented by working to reduce its prevalence, increasing the capacity of adults and students to identify and respond, and utilizing formative (non-punitive) discipline (Morrison, 2011). To prevent bullying, school staff need to be intentional and consistent in teaching the skills of respect, responsibility and reparation/restoration (Morrison, 2007).

Tiered levels of support

Implementing and maintaining a comprehensive, whole-school bullying prevention or positive school climate program using tiered levels of support is necessary to re-affirm, restore and re-build relationships damaged by bullying (Hopkins, 2004; Morrison, 2007).

Increase bystander and adult skills to intervene

Teach all students how to intervene assertively—walk away, support the child who is the target, report to a responsible adult, or assertively tell the child who is bullying to stop. Adults can treat all students with respect, help all students look valuable in the eyes of their classmates, and learn to intervene in a non-shaming manner to harmful, hurtful behaviors (Pepler, 2007).

Promote students’ assets and protective factors

Adults should build students assets and strengths by providing both students who bully and students who have been bullied opportunities in school and out of school to build social skills, find safe places to contribute to the school or community, and connect with caring adults (Benson, 2008).

Differentiate discipline and expand interventions

If a student is identified as bullying other students, in addition to any disciplinary intervention sanctioned by the school, the student should be referred to student assistance staff to explore other experiences of victimization in their life, whether in the family, community or in dating relationships. School policy should allow administrators to differentiate discipline that is formative rather than punitive. (See PrevNet, <http://prevnet.ca/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx> > Downloads > formative consequences.)

Attend to the needs of the victim

Districts should establish a policy of attending to the needs of victims of bullying, which may include discussions with student support staff, family members and family health care providers. Interventions such as restorative measures, when applied by a trained, experienced restorative facilitator, can help address the needs of victims, bullies, and other affected parties (Anderson, 1977).

Educate school staff

Teach principals, deans, assistant principals, behavior specialists and staff about the associated behaviors and experiences of victims, offenders and bully/victims. Because the students regularly involved in bullying experiences may have other forms of victimization or trauma, all staff should be trained in the universal precautions for trauma informed care (Hodas, 2006).

Coordinate policy, curriculum and practice

Interconnect bullying data, research, prevention and intervention best practices and that of other victimizations, risk behaviors or perpetration in curriculum, policy and practice. See the Common Principles of Effective Practice regarding “coherent alignment of policies and practices” (implementation teams, continuous feedback loop, shared vision, collaboration, data support, professional development) at: <http://education.state.mn.us> > Implementation of Effective Practice.

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ⁱ Both questions had the response options of “never”, “once or twice”, “about once a week”, “several times a week” or “every day”. A calculated response option for both questions was created that included student responses of “about once a week”, “several times a week”, and “every day”. This category was renamed “weekly or more”. Definitions of bullying vary, but there are common elements, including an imbalance of power, intent to cause harm and repetition. According to the U.S. Government website on bullying prevention, StopBullying.gov, “incidents of bullying happen to the same the person over and over by the same person or group of people.” For more information, go to <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/>.

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