



## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the peer popularity of middle school students involved in bullying. Bullying was assessed by peer report using the School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS) in a sample of 379 middle school students. Popularity was assessed through peer nominations from a student roster. Bullies were among the most popular students in the school, receiving more peer nominations on average (21) than students uninvolved in bullying (13) or victims (4). When bullies were divided into high popular and low popular subgroups, there were no differences on measures of types of bullying, academic grades, and disciplinary record.

## Rationale

Bullies are sometimes stereotyped as socially unskilled youth who have poor relationships with their peers. However, studies of peer aggression (e.g., Farmer & Rodkin, 1996) and the social functioning of bullies (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003) indicate that at least some bullies are socially successful. Therefore, this study investigated two basic questions:

1. How does the peer popularity of bullies compare to that of other students?
2. Do bullies with high popularity differ from bullies with low popularity?

## Methods

**Sample.** The sample consisted of 379 students enrolled in one suburban middle school in central Virginia. There were 198 boys (52%) and 181 girls (48%), with 258 students self-identified as White (68%), 93 as African-American (25%), 2 as Asian, 7 as Hispanic, 2 as Native American, 9 as Other, and 8 as Mixed.

**Bullying.** As part of the school's annual anti-bullying program, all students completed the School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS; Cornell & Sheras, 2003) during the spring of 2005.

The SCBS is a 43-item measure designed to assess bullying behavior as well as student attitudes and beliefs related to peer aggression and school climate. The SCBS presents the following definition of bullying:

"Bullying is defined as the use of one's own strength or status to injure, threaten, or humiliate another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not* bullying when two students of about the same strength argue or fight."

Due to concerns about the willingness of students to self-disclose their participation in bullying behaviors, bully status was determined by peer nominations rather than self report. Peer raters have demonstrated good agreement in the assessment of the personality and behavior of their peers (South, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2005). Using the criterion identified in previous research (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004), students who received two or more peer nominations were categorized as bullies.

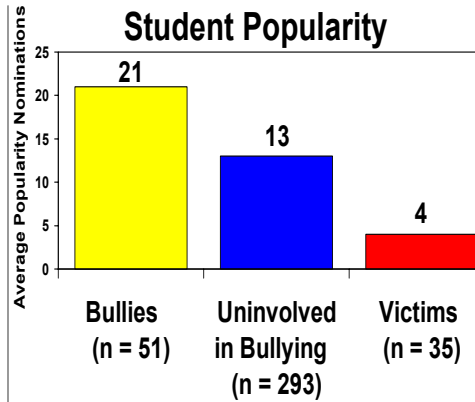
**Popularity.** Students were given a class roster and asked to circle the names of up to 10 boys and 10 girls in their grade whom they consider to be popular using the following instructions:

"Popularity" is a controversial concept. The purpose of this survey is to study "popularity" in middle school by counting how many boys and girls are considered popular in each grade and seeing whether there is agreement among students in who is popular. Your answers will be confidential and used only for research purposes. Students will not be told who is considered "popular."

Students in the top third were categorized as high popular (10+ nominations) and low popular if ranked in the lower third (2 or fewer nominations).

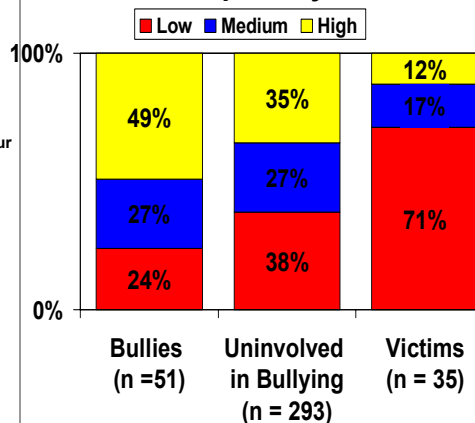
## Results

**Bully Popularity.** An ANOVA indicated statistically significant differences in the popularity of bullies, victims, and students uninvolved in bullying,  $F(2, 373) = 8.19, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Bullies ( $M = 21$ ) received more popularity nominations than both victims ( $M = 4$ ),  $F(1, 84) = 16.47, p < .01$ , and students uninvolved in bullying ( $M = 13$ ),  $F(1, 342) = 7.76, p < .02$ .



The popularity of bullies was also examined categorically. Bullies were more likely than both victims,  $\chi^2(1) = 19.09, p < .01$ , and students uninvolved in bullying,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.54, p < .05$ , to obtain high popularity status.

## Students Categorized into High, Medium, and Low Popularity



**Comparisons between High and Low Popular Bullies.** A series of analyses compared 12 low and 25 high popular bullies across several variables of interest, including types of bullying behaviors (i.e., verbal, social, physical), gender, disciplinary records,

academic performance, self-reported quality of peer and teacher relationships, bully self-nominations, victimization, and bystander roles.

With two exceptions, the high popular and low popular bullies tended to share similar characteristics.

1. A higher percentage of female bullies (50%; 7 of 14) were identified as high popular in comparison to male bullies (32%; 12 of 37),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.15, p < .05$ , one-tailed.
2. Low popular bullies ( $M = 2.8$ ) were more likely than high popular bullies ( $M = 1.0$ ) to be identified as victims,  $F(1, 35) = 4.07, p < .05$ , one-tailed,  $\eta^2 = .10$ .

## Conclusions

Instead of suffering social repercussions for the maltreatment of their peers, the majority of bullies were either high or medium in their peer popularity status. Although bullying is disapproved of, it is a way to assert social dominance and we speculate that it may serve to *facilitate* the attainment of popularity among early adolescent peers. School personnel should recognize that popular students engage in bullying that might otherwise go unnoticed. Future studies should distinguish between popularity and other markers of social status, such as likeability and friendship patterns.

## References

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