

Bullying as a predictor of offending, violence and later life outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Aim *The main aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent self-reported bullying at age 14 predicts later offending, violence and other life outcomes.*

Method *In the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, 411 South London males were followed up from age 8–10 to age 48–50, using repeated face-to-face interviews and searches of criminal records.*

Results *Bullying at age 14 predicted violent convictions between ages 15 and 20, self-reported violence at age 15–18, low job status at age 18, drug use at age 27–32, and an unsuccessful life at age 48. These results held up after controlling for explanatory and behavioural childhood risk factors at age 8–10.*

Conclusions *Bullying might increase the likelihood of these later outcomes. Interventions that decrease bullying would most likely be followed by decreases in violent offending, drug use, and unsuccessful lives. Copyright © 2011 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent self-reported bullying in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, measured at age 14, predicts later offending, and especially violent offending. In addition, the paper studies to what extent self-reported bullying predicts other life outcomes, including drug use, alcohol problems, employment problems and relationship problems, and composite measures of life success or failure at ages 32 and 48.

Several previous studies suggest that bullying predicts later offending (see Ttofi and Farrington, 2008), and there are two main reasons for this. First, bullying and offending may both be symptoms of the same underlying theoretical construct, such as anti-social tendency, which persists over time and has different behavioural manifestations at different ages. If so, bullying would not predict offending after controlling for an earlier behavioural measure of anti-social tendency. A more specific version of this hypothesis would suggest that bullying and violent offending were both symptoms of the same underlying theoretical construct, such as aggressiveness. If so, bullying would specifically predict violent

offending rather than predict general offending. With this more specific hypothesis, bullying would not predict violent offending after controlling for an earlier behavioural measure of aggressiveness.

The second possibility is that bullying increases the likelihood of later offending (or violent offending). This could occur, for example, if bullying was an earlier stage in a developmental sequence leading to offending, and if progress to each stage increased the probability of progressing to the next stage. Possibly, learning how to bully successfully, and being reinforced for bullying, could cause an increase in the underlying anti-social tendency (or aggressiveness), thereby increasing the probability of later offending (or violent offending).

In order to investigate whether bullying has a causal effect on later offending, one method would be to determine whether bullying predicted offending after controlling for earlier predictors of bullying. This is similar to propensity score matching, which would match bullies and non-bullies on the probability of bullying. A second method of investigating a causal effect would be to determine whether bullying predicted offending after controlling for earlier predictors of offending. This is similar to the comparison of predicted and actual offending rates of bullies versus non-bullies. Murray et al. (2009) considered that these methods were the most convincing ways of establishing causal risk factors after randomised experiments and controlled quasi-experimental studies investigating within-individual changes in an outcome following within-individual changes in a risk factor.

Method

Bullying and offending were measured in the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which is a prospective longitudinal survey of 411 South London males (see Farrington et al., 2006, 2009). These males were first studied at age 8–9 in 1961–1962; they have been followed up to age 48 in repeated face-to-face interviews and up to age 50 in criminal records. At age 48, 93% of the males who were still alive were interviewed, and 41% of males were convicted up to age 50. Self-reported bullying (and not peer aggression in general) was measured at age 14, in four categories of a single item: definitely no, probably no, probably yes and definitely yes. Of 406 boys interviewed at this age, 71 (17.5%) said that they were definitely bullies.

Twenty key explanatory risk factors that were measured at age 8–10 were analysed in this paper; for more information about these factors, see West and Farrington (1973). All were dichotomised, with the 'worst' quarter of boys compared with the remainder (see Farrington and Loeber, 2000). All had over 95% of boys known on them. It was important to minimise the 'not known' cases because these risk factors were used in logistic regression analyses in which missing data on any one variable would eliminate the case completely from the analysis.