

The predictive efficiency of school bullying versus later offending: A systematic/meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies

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ABSTRACT

Background *Although bullying and delinquency share similar risk factors, no previous systematic review has ever been conducted to examine possible links between school bullying and criminal offending later in life.*

Aims *To investigate the extent to which bullying perpetration at school predicts offending later in life, and whether this relation holds after controlling for other major childhood risk factors.*

Method *Results are based on a thorough systematic review and meta-analysis of studies measuring school bullying and later offending. Effect sizes are based on both published and unpublished studies; longitudinal investigators of 28 studies have conducted specific analyses for our review.*

Results *The probability of offending up to 11 years later was much higher for school bullies than for non-involved students [odds ratio (OR) = 2.50; 95% confidence interval (CI): 2.03–3.08]. Bullying perpetration was a significant risk factor for later offending, even after controlling for major childhood risk factors (OR = 1.82, 95% CI: 1.55–2.14). Effect sizes were smaller when the follow-up period was longer and larger when bullying was assessed in older children. The age of participants when outcome measures were taken was negatively related with effect sizes. Finally, the summary effect size did not decrease much as the number of controlled risk factors increased.*

Conclusions *School bullying is a strong and specific risk factor for later offending. Effective anti-bullying programmes should be promoted, and could be viewed as a form of early crime prevention. Such programmes would have a high benefit: cost ratio.*
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Introduction

School bullying is an important social problem with serious short-term consequences for the physical and psychological health of children and with long-term effects on their future psychosocial adjustment as adults (for reviews, see Ttofi and Farrington, 2008, 2010).

Major longitudinal studies in criminology have highlighted the developmental associations between early childhood emotional and behavioural problems and adolescent or early adulthood criminality (e.g. Loeber, 1996). School bullying shares many risk factors with offending (e.g. Lösel and Bliesener, 2003). School bullying, conceptualised as a distinct type of repeated aggression and a systematic abuse of power (Olweus, 1993; Smith and Sharp, 1994), is a behavioural problem that can predict future criminality even across generations (Farrington, 1993). This review examines whether school bullies differ from non-involved children in their later criminal careers.

Objectives of the review

Our objective was to conduct a systematic review of the link between bullying perpetration and later offending, and calculate standardised effect sizes with the final aim of:

1. Establishing the extent to which there is a significant association between bullying perpetration and offending behaviour later in life.
2. Establishing the unique contribution of school bullying as a risk factor for later offending (i.e. the predictive efficacy across time after controlling for other childhood risk factors).
3. Establishing what covariates (e.g. length of follow-up period; number of risk factors controlled for; age of assessment of bullying and offending) are significantly related to and can explain variability in effect sizes.

Searches

Extensive searches were conducted in 63 journals and 19 electronic databases. In addition, we contacted numerous longitudinal researchers on school bullying and developmental criminology. Further details (e.g. names of journals, key words used in databases, etc.) can be found in a report which is being prepared the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Ttofi et al., in preparation).