



Bullying & Selected Risk Factors Among Adolescents in Oklahoma

INTRODUCTION

Bullying occurs in many forms; it can be physical, emotional, social, sexual, and/or cyber. Unlike normal conflict, there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, where the target has difficulty defending himself or herself (Olweus, 1993, Rivara and Menestrel, 2016). Bullying occurs in different places; however, school is the most common location. Bullying is not a normal part of childhood and is considered a public health problem.

Bullying is often viewed as a normal part of growing up, but the long-lasting consequences should not be ignored or discounted. The impact of bullying does not stop with the completion of school; it has an effect across an individual's life span. Negative long-term effects have been found for both the child who is bullied and the child who is bullying. Bystanders can be affected by the exposure as well (Rivara and Menestrel, 2016). Students who are bullied may fall behind in school, as a result of skipping school or an inability to focus on class work while at school due to fear. Those who bully have lower self-esteem which tends to follow them as they age and may result in a lack of appropriate social skills. Those who are bullied tend to carry those memories with them for many years, causing them to fear relationships and feel worthless, which can sometimes lead to aggressive behavior and/or suicidal thoughts (Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007). Existing evidence shows that children who are bullied experience sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal concerns, headaches, and a range of other somatic disturbances. There are also changes in the stress response system and in the brain that increase the risk of mental health problems, cognitive dysfunction, inability to self-regulate behaviors, and other physical health problems. Being bullied as an adolescent has been linked to psychological effects, such as depression and anxiety, as well as alcohol and drug abuse into adulthood (Rivara and Menestrel, 2016).

*Bullying behaviors are seen as early as preschool, although it peaks during the middle school years.
-Beane, 2008, Rivara and Menestrel, 2016*

However, bullying is still commonly experienced during high school. No matter the circumstance, no one deserves to be bullied. This study will examine bullying rates among Oklahoma high school students to help determine the prevalence rate and related risk behaviors of this important public health issue.

RESULTS

The percent of 9-12th grade public school students who reported being bullied on school property has seen no statistically significant change from 17.5% in 2009 to 20.4% in 2015. Similarly, the percent of 9-12th grade students who reported being bullied electronically has seen no statistically significant change from 15.6% in 2011 to 14.5% in 2015.

One in five public high school students in Oklahoma were bullied on school property and one in seven were bullied electronically, which included through texting, Instagram, Facebook, or other social media.

Differences were observed by gender as females were more likely than males to be bullied on school property and electronically (*see Table 1*).

Differences were also observed by grade, as 9th graders were more likely to be bullied at school (27.3%, CI 22.2-32.3) than 11th graders (16.6%, CI 11.1-22.1) and 12th graders (11.6%, CI 6.8-16.6), and were more likely to be bullied electronically (17.1%, CI 13.6-20.6) than 12th graders (8.8%, CI 5.3-12.3). No differences were observed by race or ethnicity.

When examining bullying with other risk behaviors, significant associations were observed. Students who reported being bullied on school property were significantly more likely than those who had not been bullied on school property to have: fought at school (15.3% vs. 4.9%); felt unsafe at school (14.3% vs. 1.8%); felt sad or hopeless (60.0% vs. 20.8%); seriously considered suicide (38.1% vs. 9.1%); and to have used marijuana recently (21.1% vs. 16.6%), *See Figure 1.*

Students who reported being bullied electronically during the past 12 months were more likely than those who had not been bullied electronically to have: fought at school; felt unsafe at school; felt sad or hopeless; seriously considered suicide; drank alcohol during the past 30 days; and used marijuana recently.

Table 1. Prevalence of Bullying by Demographic Characteristics: Oklahoma YRBS 2015

Characteristics	Bullied at School			Bullied Electronically		
	% ¹	SE ²	Chi-square p value	%	SE	Chi-square p value
Gender						
Female	26.0	1.8		20.7	1.9	
Male	14.7	1.6	<.0001	8.1	1.0	<.0001
Grade						
9th	27.3	2.5		17.1	1.7	
10th	23.5	2.4		16.9	2.6	
11th	16.6	2.7		13.3	2.0	
12th	11.6	2.4	<.0001	8.8	1.7	0.0087
Race/Ethnicity						
NH ³ White	21.0	1.8		16.4	1.9	
NH Black	17.6	5.3		7.6	2.2	
NH Native American	17.8	3.3		12.1	3.2	
NH Multiple	22.4	3.7		15.1	3.2	
Hispanic	20.5	3.3	0.8969	13.3	1.9	0.1974
Total	20.4			14.5		

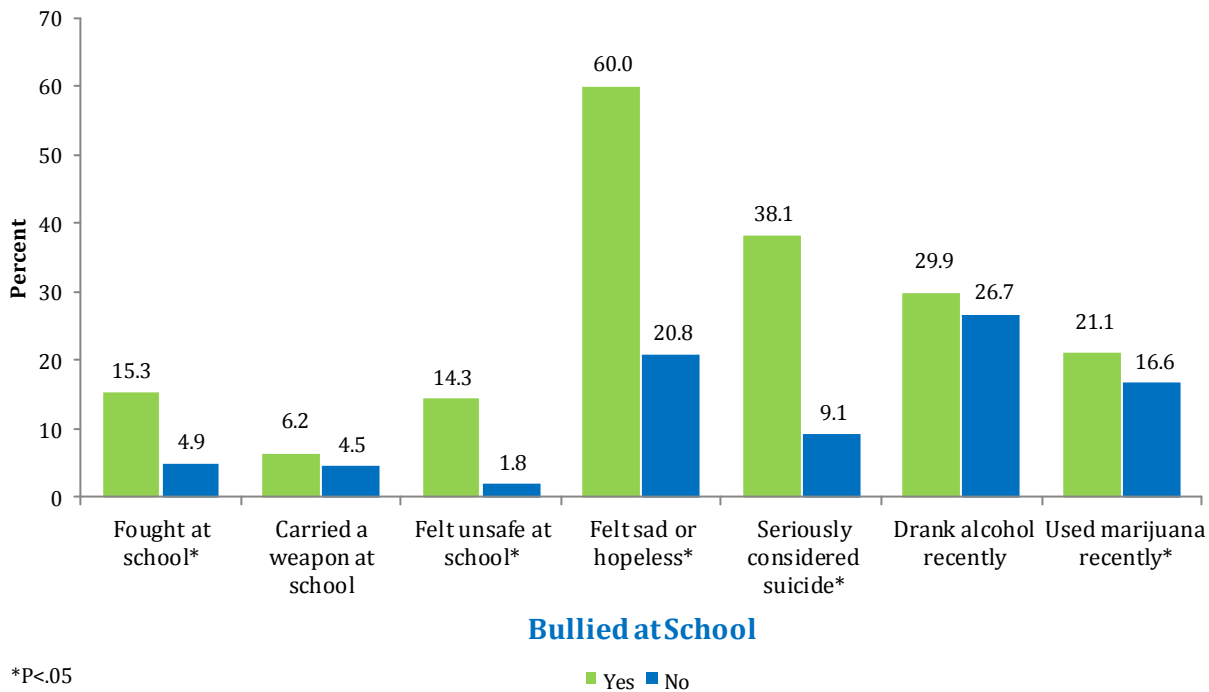
1 Weighted percent representative of all public school 9-12 graders

2 Standard error

3 Non-Hispanic

Data were not shown for Asian/Pacific Islanders due to statistical imprecision

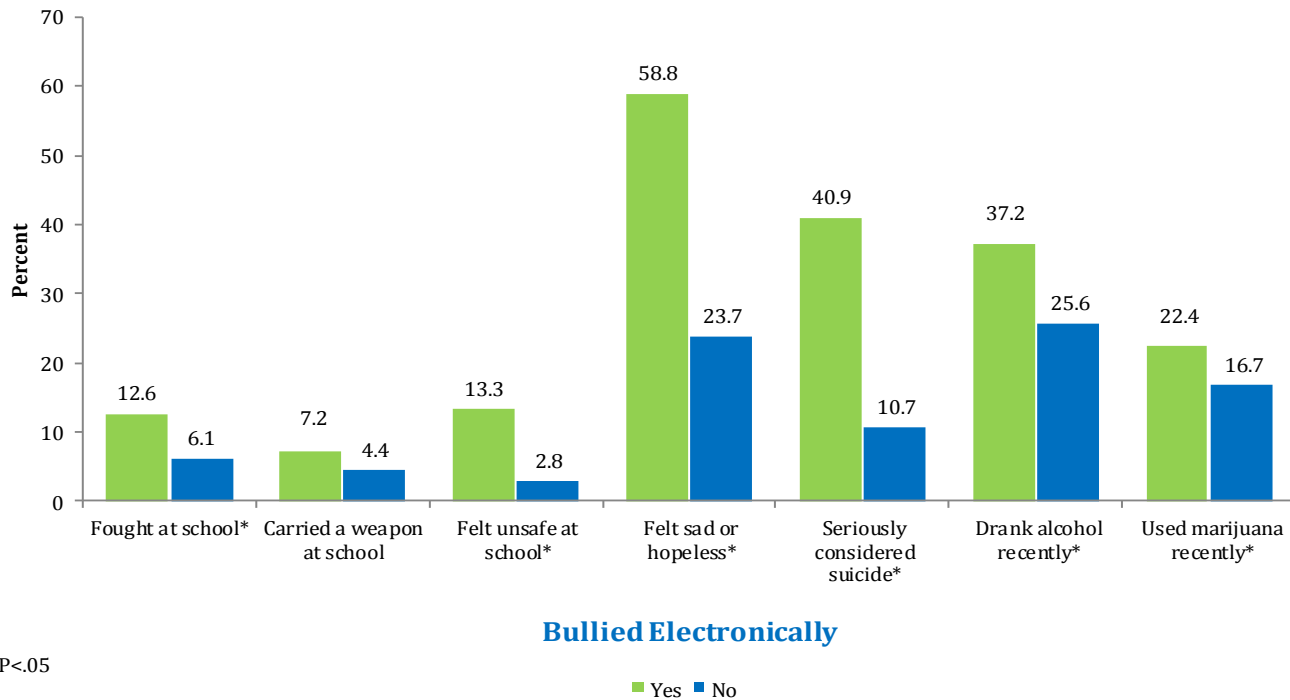
Figure 1. Prevalence of Selected Risk Behaviors by Bullied at School: Oklahoma YRBS 2015



*P<.05

■ Yes ■ No

Figure 2. Prevalence of Selected Risk Behaviors by Bullied Electronically: Oklahoma YRBS 2015



DISCUSSION

The prevalence of bullying statewide has remained unchanged over time. Gender and age were associated with a higher likelihood of school-based bullying. Females were more likely to report having been bullied at school and to have been a victim of cyber bullying. Ninth graders were more likely than 11th and 12th graders to have been bullied on school property and more likely than 12th graders to be bullied electronically. And, as found in other studies, students in Oklahoma who were bullied were more likely to have engaged in risk behaviors such as fighting at school, drinking alcohol, using marijuana, and were more likely to have felt unsafe at school, have felt sadness or hopeless and have thoughts of suicide.

From a very early age, children are encouraged to not “tattletale” so often students will not report bullying to adults.

It is important for parents and school staff to be aware of warning signs such as a sudden drop in grades, fear of going to school, having more nightmares, blaming themselves for everything, scratches/bruising on their body, or becoming overly aggressive in or out of the classroom. -Beane, 2008

Bullying is an extremely, psychologically harmful behavior that has been linked to suicidal ideations due to the bullied individuals’ feelings of hopelessness and lack of self-worth.

Some activities are underway in the state to reduce the prevalence of bullying among youth. The Oklahoma legislature created House Bill 1661 because of the negative effect of bullying on the social environment of schools, creating a climate of fear among students, inhibiting their ability to learn, and potentially leading to other antisocial behavior. The bill mandates school staff and administration to attend annual training on bullying prevention. Every district is to have a policy prohibiting all forms of bullying and each school principal or designee is to investigate whether bullying is occurring in their school. The bill requires schools to give disciplinary actions, remedial actions, and counseling for all incidents reported. This bill, which went into effect on November 1, 2013 is formally known as “The School Safety and Bullying Prevention Act.”

However, there is more work to be done to reduce the impact this legislation has in our state. Bullying is an issue that requires parents, schools, communities and public health professionals to work together to have a collective impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PARENTS can help try to protect their children from bullying or being bullied by taking the following actions (Beane, 2008):



- At an early age, teach the “Golden Rule: treat others the way that you want to be treated” and be a role model for the message.
- Build your child’s positive self-esteem by respecting their self and complimenting their positive characteristics.
- Build their physical strength by being active.
- Encourage social hobbies and quality friendships. Get to know your child’s friends’ parents.
- Discipline your child with care and give unconditional love.
- Encourage open communication about everything, including bullying. Practice scenarios and appropriate responses with them where they play the part of being a victim of bullying or as a bystander to a bullying incident. Bystanders outnumber the bully and can make a difference.
- Place your computer in a family room where you can monitor your child’s cyber activities.
- Support the school’s anti-bullying policy. Get a copy of it and review it with your child, explaining the consequences of bullying and letting them know that you will support their consequences to any incidents.



SCHOOLS can help prevent bullying by doing the following (Rivara and Menestrel, 2016):

- Use a multicomponent schoolwide approach to prevent bullying, focusing on school climate, positive behavior support, social-emotional learning, and violence prevention.
- Provide training to all school staff, including cafeteria workers and bus drivers, on how to recognize behaviors of bullies and victims of bullying. Teachers who were provided training felt more confident handling bullying situations, showed supportive attitudes towards the target of bullying, and felt more positive talking to parents regarding the bullying problems.
- Have more supervision in high risk areas such as school buses, playgrounds, cafeteria, and hallways in between classes.
- Encourage leadership groups, like Student Council, to make a bullying prevention bulletin board, to be role models for healthy relationship behaviors, and to stand up for those that may be victims of bullying.

METHODS

The Oklahoma Youth Risk Behavior Survey is a statewide, randomized survey conducted biennially on odd-numbered years. The 2015 sample was selected using a two-stage sampling design. Schools were first selected for participation based on probability proportional to size (school enrollment in grades 9 through 12). Classes were then selected from each school using systematic equal probability sampling with a random start. For the 2015 YRBS, 1,611 questionnaires were completed in 41 public high schools representing an overall response rate of 69%. The sample was weighted to be representative of Oklahoma public high school students in grades 9 through 12 based on the demographic distribution of the enrolled student population provided by the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

BULLYING PREVALENCE

Two survey questions were used to assess bullying prevalence:

1. During the past 12 months, have you ever been bullied on school property?

RESPONSE: YES

2. During the past 12 months, have you ever been electronically bullied? (Count being bullied through texting, Instagram, Facebook, or other social media.)

RESPONSE: NO

SELECTED RISK BEHAVIORS

Seven risk behaviors were analyzed in this study.

1. Fought at school was defined as the percent of students who reported they had been in a fight one or more times on school property during the past 12 months.
2. Carried a weapon at school was defined as the percent of students who reported carrying a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on one or more days on school property during the past 30 days.
3. Felt unsafe at school was defined as the percent of students who reported not going to school because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on their way to or from school on one or more of the past 30 days.
4. Felt sad or hopeless was defined as the percent of students who reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities during the past 12 months.
5. Seriously considered suicide was defined as the percent of students who reported seriously considering attempting suicide during the past 12 months.
6. Drank alcohol recently was defined as the percent of students who reported having at least one drink of alcohol on one or more of the past 30 days.
7. Used marijuana recently was defined as the percent of students who reported using marijuana one or more times during the past 30 days.

SAS 9.4 was used to perform analyses. SAS PROC SURVEYFREQ was used to generate descriptive statistics and to perform bivariate analyses. Variables were examined using percentages and 95% confidence intervals (CI). The chi-square test was used to test for differences in proportions. Variables were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

LIMITATIONS

The YRBS is a cross-sectional study and reflects only a snapshot in time. The 2015 data were weighted to be representative of Oklahoma public high school students from 9th to 12th grade. Students who were home-schooled, attended private schools, or did not attend any school are not represented in these data. Because the survey data are self-reported data, some behaviors may be under-reported, whereas others may be over-reported. The definition of bullying is not universal; therefore students answer questions about bullying based on their culture's definition of the term and their personal understanding and beliefs about bullying.

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