

School bullies more likely to be substance users, study finds

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Middle- and high-school students who bully their classmates are more likely than others to use substances such as cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana, a new study found.

Researchers found that bullies and bully-victims – youth who are both perpetrators and victims – were more likely to use substances than were victims and non-involved youth.

"Our findings suggest that one deviant behavior may be related to another," said Kisha Radliff, lead author of the study and assistant professor of school psychology at Ohio State University.

"For example, youth who bully others might be more likely to also try substance use. The reverse could also be true in that youth who use substances might be more likely to bully others."

The researchers didn't find as strong a link between victims of [bullying](#) and substance use.

Radliff conducted the study with Joe Wheaton, associate professor in Special Education, and Kelly Robinson and Julie Morris, both former graduate students, all at Ohio State.

Their study appears in the April 2012 issue of the journal *Addictive Behaviors*.

Data for the study came from a survey of 74,247 students enrolled in all public, private and Catholic middle and high schools in Franklin County, Ohio (which includes Columbus).

Among the 152 questions on the survey were eight that involved bullying, either as a victim or perpetrator. Students were asked about how often they told lies or spread false rumors about others, pushed people around to make them afraid, or left someone out of a group to hurt them. They were also asked how often they were the victims of such actions.

In addition, the questionnaire asked how often they used cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana. For this study, users were defined as those who reported use at least once a month.

Results showed that bullying was more common among middle-school students than those in [high school](#), while substance use was more prevalent among [high-school students](#).

About 30 percent of middle-school students were bullies, victims or bully-victims, compared to 23 percent of those in high school.

Fewer than 5 percent of middle-school youth used cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana. But among high-school students, about 32 percent reported alcohol use, 14 percent used cigarettes and 16 percent used marijuana.

But substance use varied depending on involvement in bullying, the researchers found.

For example, among middle-school students, only 1.6 percent of those not involved in bullying reported marijuana use. But 11.4 percent of bullies and 6.1 percent of bully-victims used the drug. Findings showed that 2.4 percent of victims were marijuana users.

Among high school students, 13.3 percent of those not involved in bullying were marijuana users – compared to 31.7 percent of bullies, 29.2 percent of bully-victims, and 16.6 percent of victims.

Similar results were found for alcohol and cigarette use.

But the percentages tell only part of the story, Radliff said. The researchers also used a statistical analysis that showed that bullies and bully-victims had much higher than expected levels of substance use.

"That suggests there is a relationship between experimenting with substances and engaging in bullying behavior," she said.

Statistically, however, there was no connection between being a victim and substance use among middle-school [students](#), according to Radliff. The use of [cigarettes](#) and [alcohol](#) was statistically greater for victims in high school, but there was no statistically significant effect on [marijuana](#) use.

Nevertheless, it was the bullies and bully-victims who were the most likely to be substance users.

Radliff said these results may lead to ways anti-bullying initiatives can be improved.

"Many schools are mandating anti-bullying programs and policies, and we think they need to take this opportunity to address other forms of deviant behavior, such as substance use," she said.

This might be especially important in middle school, where bullying is more prevalent, but substance use is still relatively rare.

"If we can intervene with bullies while they're in middle school, we may

be able to help them before they start experimenting with substance use," she said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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