

Laws in 25 states put the brakes on high school bullying

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In the most comprehensive study of the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies to date, researchers found that compliance with the U.S. Department of Education guidelines in antibullying laws reduced rates of bullying and cyberbullying—the most common forms of peer aggression. The study, which uncovered varying rates of bullying reported across the states, has important implications for educators, policy makers, and researchers. Findings will appear online in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

"Though bullying is the result of a complicated set of social, psychological, and peer impulses, we now see that laws aimed to reduce bullying are successful," said Mark Hatzenbuehler, PhD, associate professor of Sociomedical Sciences at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, who led the study with Marizen Ramirez, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health in the University of Iowa's College of Public Health and colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "While policies alone cannot completely eradicate bullying, these data suggest that legislation represents an important part of a comprehensive strategy to prevent bullying."

These findings are significant for many reasons, including giving a "green light" to conduct more granular studies that focus on different combinations of legislation, how implementation of these policies affects their effectiveness, and whether antibullying legislation is effective in protecting students who are most vulnerable to bullying.

Responses of more than 60,000 adolescents in grades 9 to 12 to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance were matched against data on anti-bullying legislation in 25 states obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, which commissioned a review of state law in 2011. Each state was assigned compliance scores for 16 components identified by the Department.

Findings showed there were three critical components to having successful antibullying state laws in terms of reducing both bullying and cyberbullying: a description of where schools can intervene to address bullying—for example, on school grounds only or beyond; a clear definition of bullying; and a requirement that schools have a local policy or a timeline when a policy must be in place. Training elements, enumerated groups, and communication of the policies were also effective for reducing either cyberbullying or traditional face-to-face bullying. The study controlled for state-level violent crime rates and historical bullying rates, which otherwise may have affected the results.

High school students in states with at least one component in the antibullying law were 24 percent less likely to report acts of bullying and 20 percent less likely to be cyberbullied compared to students in states without legislation. Rates of bullying ranged from a low of 13 percent reported by Alabama to 27 percent for South Dakota. Cyberbullying rates ranged from 12 percent in Alabama to 20 percent in South Dakota and an overall average of 15.5 percent. Students were considered a target of bullying if they reported being bullied on school property in the past year and a target of cyberbullying if they reported being electronically bullied (e.g., through email, texting, Websites) in the past year.

"Bullying is a common experience among children, and passing legislation to curb bullying is an important prevention strategy," said Ramirez. "However, research on the effectiveness of these laws has been lagging. This research represents an important step in linking public

health research with the practice of public health law. Moving forward, this collaboration will help identify what laws are most effective in curbing bullying in schools."

These results follow on earlier findings that revealed far lower rates of suicide attempts among gay and lesbian youths in Oregon counties whose anti-bullying legislation mentioned sexual orientation. In that study, published in 2013, Hatzenbuehler and Katherine Keyes, also of the Mailman School, addressed the county-by-county variability of this legislation and found that more specific policies provided the most protection for lesbian and gay youth.

"Bullying and cyberbullying are significant public health issues that threaten American youth's well-being," said Marci Hertz, MS, lead health scientist, CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. "Bullying hurts kids physically and emotionally and can affect how well they do in school. This research will help us proactively identify and put in place strategies to protect our children from bullying and bullying-related behaviors using evidence-based strategies."

"Although more research is needed, our study is an important first step in providing guidance to legislators and school administrators about best practices to reduce bullying and to give protection to young people all over the country," Hatzenbuehler said.

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