

Bully victimization does not lead to substance abuse, says study

March 8 2016, by Kim Horner

Being bullied can hurt young children in many ways, but a new UT Dallas study found that it does not lead to later substance abuse.

The research by three criminologists in UT Dallas' School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences (EPPS) discovered that students who were bullied in third grade did not have a greater risk of using drugs or alcohol by ninth grade.

But the researchers found that children who had experienced the highest level of victimization smoked cigarettes or used alcohol at higher rates than high school peers. The study noted that experimentation with drugs and alcohol is common among adolescents regardless of whether they had been bullied.

"The findings speak to the necessity of continuing to encourage meaningful substance use prevention programs during adolescence and making sure students have the resilience skills necessary to stay away from substances," said Dr. Nadine Connell, assistant professor of criminology and lead author of the study. "Early in-school victimization may, however, have other consequences that should be explored."

The study, published in the journal *Victims & Offenders*, used longitudinal data from 763 students in a Northeastern U.S. school district.

Connell worked with co-authors Dr. Robert Morris, associate professor

of criminology and director of the Center for Crime and Justice Studies in EPPS, and Dr. Alex Piquero, Ashbel Smith Professor of Criminology and associate dean for graduate programs in EPPS.

The three researchers published another recent study that found that relatively minor events in a child's life can help predict bullying behavior. The events included a new sibling, an ill sibling, failing grades, feeling unpopular with peers and being bullied at a young age.

That study, published in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, also used data from the Northeastern U.S. school district.

"This speaks to the importance early life events can have on adolescent experiences and the need for early intervention when problems first arise," Connell said.

Research on bullying has focused on the consequences of victimization. The new research advances the understanding of the bullies themselves, Connell said.

"As we learn more about the consequences of bullying, we need to do more work to identify perpetrators and find ways to combat the behavior earlier," she said.

The findings suggest that early life events may disrupt the developmental process, she said.

"This opens up new ways to explore the developmental trajectory of bullying behavior and gives us potential target points for early intervention," Connell said.

The research is the latest from UT Dallas criminologists that focuses on

bullying. A 2013 study by Connell and Piquero, with co-author Dr. Nicole Leeper Piquero, criminology professor and associate provost, found that adults who were bullies in adolescence had a higher likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior later in life.

"Bullying victimization is an adverse experience that has negative ramifications over the life course," Dr. Alex Piquero said. "We need to understand what kinds of factors increase the likelihood of being the victim of a bully, so that we can identify and target those risk factors with evidence-based prevention efforts.

"As well, knowledge on the correlates of bullying perpetration will help teachers, parents and social-service providers identify the risk factors that increase the likelihood that youths may bully others. Targeting such efforts could help reduce the incidence of [bullying](#) and its negative consequences."

More information: Nadine M. Connell et al. Exploring the Link between Being Bullied and Adolescent Substance Use, *Victims & Offenders* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/15564886.2015.1055416](https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2015.1055416)

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