

Bullying Victimization and Mental Wellbeing in Scottish Schoolchildren

In a nutshell

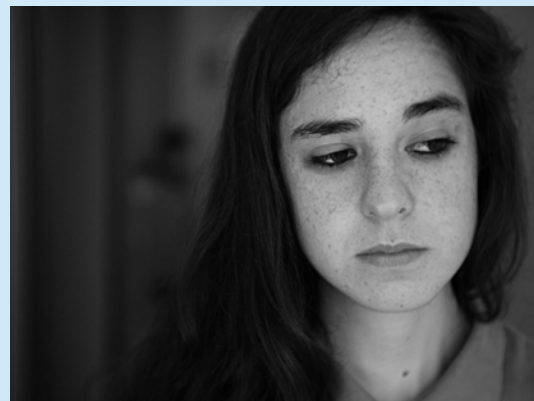
- Being a victim of bullying increased for Scottish schoolchildren over the period 1994-2014.
- Although older children were less likely to experience bullying, the link between being bullied and poor mental wellbeing was stronger for them.
- Older bullied girls (age 13 and 15 years) showed the most dramatic increase in symptoms of mental ill-health over time, and a corresponding decrease in happiness.
- Interventions to help children who are being bullied may be an important way to improve their mental wellbeing and prevent victimisation from continuing.

Importance

Bullying behaviour affects the wellbeing of children and young people, leading to reduced participation, lower attainment and exclusion (Scottish Govt, 2017) and many studies have shown that being bullied is closely linked to poor mental health. Both bullying prevention and promoting mental wellbeing in schools are key priorities for the Scottish Government.

What we know

- Research has shown that being a victim of bullying at school is linked to loneliness, depression and low self-esteem.
- These harmful effects extend beyond school into young adulthood.
- Being bullied in adolescence has even stronger links to future victimisation than being bullied in earlier childhood.
- Patterns in the levels of bullying in schoolchildren vary by country. Levels of bullying in Scotland were relatively high for 11 and 13 year olds compared to other countries in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey 2014.
- Little research has looked at how the relationship between being bullied and mental wellbeing has changed over time.



What the researchers did

- The researchers used data from 37,658 pupils aged 11, 13 and 15 years who had taken part in the Scottish Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children survey (HBSC) between 1994-2014.
- Pupils were asked if they had been bullied in the last few months, and how frequently this had happened.

- Pupils were also asked to rate how confident and how happy they felt, as well as reporting physical symptoms related to mental health such as headaches, dizziness and stomach aches.
- The researchers looked at trends in bullying victimisation over time, among boys and girls of different ages.
- They then explored how being bullied is related to mental wellbeing over time.

What they found

Trends in bullying victimisation

- Overall there was an increase in reports of being bullied in the 20 years from 1994-2014 for Scottish pupils, and this pattern was found for both boys and girls.
- Older pupils were less likely to have been bullied than younger pupils.

Issues to consider

- These findings are based on sample of schoolchildren, who were drawn to be representative of schoolchildren in Scotland.
- The measures of being bullied and mental wellbeing were self-reported. It is possible that changes in rates partly reflect an increased willingness to report issues.
- Bullying victimisation and mental wellbeing measures were taken at the same time in each survey so we cannot say that being bullied caused poorer mental wellbeing. Indeed, other studies have shown that bullying can be both a cause and a consequence of poor mental wellbeing.

Relationship between being bullied and mental wellbeing

- The relationship between being bullied and mental wellbeing varied by age and gender. Overall, bullied pupils reported lower levels of happiness and higher levels of physical symptoms than those who were not bullied.
- Over time there was a particularly strong trend for bullied 13 and 15 year old girls to report more symptoms of mental ill-health along with lower levels of happiness.
- Older pupils showed the strongest relationship between being bullied and mental health. This may be due to a cumulative effect of bullying victimisation, or it may be that children who are bullied become more isolated, further increasing the impact of bullying over time.

What does this mean for my school?

- Despite national initiatives, bullying remains an important issue for Scottish schoolchildren, and a key factor associated with their mental wellbeing.
- Targeted interventions to support victims of bullying from an early age would be a valuable way to improve their mental wellbeing and help prevent victimisation continuing into later adolescence and adulthood.
- Resources such as the Respect Me website (respectme.org.uk) can be valuable in working alongside young people on this topic

Based on: **Cosma, A., Whitehead, R., Neville, F., Currie, D. & Inchley, I. (2017) Trends in bullying victimization in Scottish adolescents 1994-2014: changing associations with mental well-being. International Journal of Public Health**

Read the full research paper at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-017-0965-6>

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey is a cross-national survey of school students which collects data every four years on 11-, 13- and 15-year-old boys' and girls' health and well-being, social environments and health behaviours. Find out more about the HBSC at www.hbsc.org and read the Scottish 2014 Survey report at bit.ly/hbsc-scot-2014

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