

# Observers of Bullying: Invisible Victims?

Kelly Brey Love, MA, Susan M. Swearer, PhD, Jody L. Lieske, MA, Kristin E. Foreman, BA,  
& Katherine Bevins, MA  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
Kisha M. Haye, MA  
Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

## INTRODUCTION

- Bullying in American schools is in the forefront of the collective consciousness of the public, educators, researchers and legislators.

- Prevalence rates have estimated that 29.9% of students were involved in bullying as a bully, victim, or a bully-victim (Nansel et al., 2001).

- While researchers have examined prevalence rates for bullies, victims, and bully-victims, less has been reported regarding rates for individuals who observe bullying, or the "bystanders."

- Eighty seven percent of students fulfill the role of "participant" in bullying interactions (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

- Research conducted by Craig (1995) appears to concur with these findings, reporting the presence of bystanders in 85% of bullying interactions.

- While studies have analyzed rates of aggression and depression among those often characterized as "actively" involved in bullying, no studies have specifically analyzed the prevalence of depression and aggression among the observers of bullying.

- Research has found that rates of depression (Barkin, Kreiter & DuRant, 2001; Howard, Feigelman, Ki, Cross & Rachuba, 2002; Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English & Everson, 2002) and externalizing problems (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Osofsky, Cohen & Drell, 1995) are often much higher in those who observe aggression than in those who do not.

- Scarpa (2003) found that adolescents with high levels of exposure to violence and aggression reported more psychological maladjustment including depressed mood, aggressive behavior, and interpersonal problems.

- Thus, it appears that witnessing aggression may be related to increased levels of aggressive and depressive symptomatology.

- The purpose of this study was to determine if there are differences between exposure to (i.e., bystanders) and participation in bullying and reported aggression and depression scores in middle school youth.

## PARTICIPANTS

- 396 students (168 male, 228 female) participated in the study.

- Participants were middle school students (grades 6-9) in a Midwestern city.

- Racial distribution of the students in the study was as follows: 86.1% Caucasian, 3.3% Asian, 3.0% African American, 2.0% Latino(a), 1.0% Native American, .5% Middle Eastern, .5% Eastern European, and 3.5% identifying as "other."

## PROCEDURES

- Data were collected in the Spring of 2002.

- Active parental consent and youth assent were obtained for each student participant.

- Student participants completed a series of instruments which were administered during the school day and took approximately 1 hour to complete.

- Student participants were grouped according to involvement in observation of bullying (i.e., bully-bystander, victim bystander, bully-victim bystander, or pure bystander) based upon their responses on the Bully Survey (Swearer, 2001). Bully-bystanders nominated themselves as engaging in bullying others, as well as observing bullying interactions. Victim bystanders nominated themselves as a victim, as well as observing bullying interactions. Bully-victim bystanders nominated themselves as engaging in bullying others, as a victim, as well as observing bullying interactions. Pure bystanders report their only involvement in bullying as an observer.

## MEASURES

### The Bully Survey-Student Version (BYS-S) Swearer, 2001.

The Bully Survey-Student Version is a four part survey that queries students regarding their experiences with bullying, perceptions of bullying, and attitudes toward bullying. Bullying is defined as: "Anything from teasing, saying mean things, or leaving someone out of a group to physical attacks (hitting, pushing, kicking) where one person or a group of people picks on another person over a long time. Bullying refers to things that happen in school but can also include things that happen on the school grounds or going to and from school." In part A, students answer questions about when they were victims of bullying during the past year. Part B of the survey addresses questions about the participants' observations of bullying behavior among their peers during the past year (bystander). Part C requests information from the participants about when they have bullied other students.

### Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) Kovacs, 1992, 2002

This instrument is the most commonly used self-report measure of depression for children 7 to 17 years of age. The CDI consists of 27 items designed to assess the overt symptoms of childhood depression. Participants are asked to rate the severity of each item on a three-point scale of 0 to 2 during the two weeks prior to testing. Total scores of 19 or greater are considered to indicate potential depression (Stark, 1990). In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .87 for the total score.

### The Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) Buss & Warren, 2000

This instrument is an updated version of the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957), a standard measure for assessing anger and aggression. The AQ is a self-report measure, consisting of 34 items designed to assess anger and aggression in individuals ranging from 9-88 years old. A total aggression score (AQ Total) is also provided by summing the raw scores for the five subscales. AQ Total scores of 110 or greater (T-Score = 60) are considered to indicate high levels of aggression. In the present study, the internal consistency reliability using coefficient alpha was .92 for the total score.

## RESULTS

Figure 1: CDI

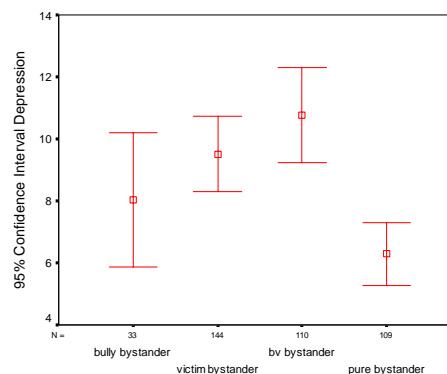
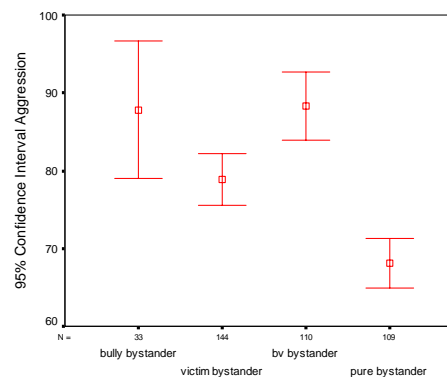


Figure 2: AQ



- A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between bystander status and depression and aggression scores.

- ANOVA indicates a statistically significant difference across groups for both depression  $F(3, 392) = 8.245, p = .000$  and aggression  $F(3, 392) = 19.412, p = .000$ .

- Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD were conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means.

## RESULTS, continued

- A significant difference in reports of depression was found between the bully-victim bystanders and pure bystanders, and between victim bystanders and pure bystanders.

- A significant difference in report of aggression was found between bully-victims and pure bystanders, between victim bystanders and pure bystanders, and bully bystanders and pure bystanders.

- Bully-victim bystanders reported higher levels of both depression and aggression than any other status group

- Victim bystanders and bully victim bystanders reported significantly higher depression than pure bystanders.

- Bully bystanders, victim bystanders, and bully victim bystanders report significantly higher aggression than pure bystanders

- Bully-victim bystanders also report significantly higher aggression than both victim bystanders and pure bystanders

- Bully-victim bystander mean scores for both measures were significantly higher than those reported by pure bystanders.

## DISCUSSION

- Those students often characterized as "actively involved" (i.e., bully bystander, victim bystander and bully-victim bystander) report significantly higher aggression than those whose only involvement is as a bystander.

- Specifically, students reporting multiple roles in bullying (i.e., bully-victim bystanders) appear to be the most impaired. As such, this may be some preindication of comorbidity of depression and aggression.

- Future intervention efforts should focus on the bully-victim bystanders, as they are reporting the highest depression and anxiety, as well as involvement in several roles along the bully-victim continuum (e.g., report involvement as bullies, victims, and bystanders of bullying).

## LIMITATIONS

- The measures used in this study were self-report and may reflect common method variance. While research has illustrated the accuracy of this method, future research utilizing multiple informants such as parent and/or teacher might further validate these findings.

- Analysis of bullies, victims and bully-victims that were not bystanders, as well as analysis of comorbidity of anxiety and depression was not possible due to the small cell sizes. As such, we are unable to specifically identify that it is the observation of the bullying interactions that directly contributes to depression and aggression. Future analyses should utilize a larger sample to further explore this research question.

- Given that the sample used in this study was a community sample, few subjects endorsed clinically significant levels of depression and anxiety.

- Severity of bullying interactions was not examined in this study.

- Future research should also include students who do not report any involvement in bullying to determine if they report lower depression and aggression as compared to those who witness bullying.