

Bullying: Incidence of Peer Violence in the Schools of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to carry out an epidemiological analysis of bullying in the students of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. The study analyzes some characteristics, the incidence, and types of peer violence, as well as the bullying rate or percentage of victimization. Epidemiological methodology was used with a representative sample of 5,983 participants from 5th and 6th grades of Primary Education (10-12 years) and from Compulsory Secondary Education (12-16 years) distributed in 169 centers. In order to measure the variables of interest, two assessment instruments were administered: the *School Violence Questionnaire: Peer Maltreatment in Compulsory Secondary Education*, and *The Checklist My Life at School*. The most noteworthy results confirm that the great majority of the students feel well treated by their classmates. The bullying rate obtained is 5.8% of victims in Primary Education and 3.8% in Secondary Education. As the students grow older, intimidating behavior decreases. The most frequent aggression is verbal aggression and the place where most aggressions occur is in the schoolyard. The aggressor is predominantly male, from the same class as the victim, and most of the aggressions are carried out in an exclusively male group.

Keywords: bullying, epidemiology, peer violence.

RESUMEN

El objetivo del estudio fue realizar un análisis epidemiológico del *bullying* en los escolares de la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco. El trabajo analiza algunas características, incidencias y tipos de violencia entre iguales, así como el índice de *bullying* o porcentaje de victimización. Se utiliza una metodología epidemiológica con una muestra de 5.983 participantes de 5^o y 6^o de Educación Primaria (10-12 años) y de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (12-16 años) distribuidos en 169 centros. Se administraron 2 instrumentos de evaluación, el *Cuestionario de violencia escolar: El maltrato entre iguales en la ESO* y la *Lista de chequeo: Mi vida en la escuela*. Los resultados más destacados constatan que la gran mayoría de los escolares se sienten bien tratados por sus compañeros. El índice de *bullying* obtenido es del 5,8% de víctimas en Primaria y 3,8% en Secundaria. A medida que aumenta la edad disminuyen las conductas intimidatorias. La agresión más frecuente es la de tipo verbal y el lugar donde más agresiones se producen es el patio del colegio. El agresor primordialmente es varón, de la misma clase que la víctima y la mayoría de las agresiones las realiza en grupo exclusivamente masculino. *Palabras clave:* *bullying*, epidemiología, violencia entre iguales.

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Peer relations and experiences, either with classmates or friends from another setting, are an essential environment for children's and adolescents' adequate development. In this way, they acquire a broad array of skills, habits, and attitudes that enhance their adaptation and social integration for the rest of their lives. This kind of relations, together with relations with family members, schoolmates, and neighbors, contribute to youngsters' security and social, emotional, and cognitive adjustment. As in any human relation, peer relations involve conflicts, although when they are faced and solved constructively, conflicts can have a positive effect on development, but at other times they can be a negative factor for the person. This work examines the negative facet of such relations in a given context, that is, peer violence at school, or bullying. This phenomenon has always existed but it has currently gained more importance thanks to the awareness of society, which demands more information about the incidence and characteristics involved in school bullying, as well as intervention in its diverse phases. Chart 1 was elaborated in order to synthesize the results of the studies carried out in diverse places of Europe with regard to the percentages of aggressors and bullying victims

Within this framework of the phenomenon, the purpose of this study was to carry out an epidemiological analysis of the incidence of school bullying among peers in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC) in late infancy and early adolescence, that is, the phenomenon conceptualized internationally as *bullying*. The study proposes eight hypotheses: 1) The great majority of students feel well treated by their classmates; 2) Both victims and aggressors perceive the incidence of bullying with a similar frequency, except for the victims of Primary Education, because victimization is higher at this educational stage; 3) Verbal aggression is the most frequent type of aggression (insulting, using insulting nicknames, and speaking ill of someone); 4) The most severe forms of aggressive behavior (sexual harassment, forcing another student to perform demeaning actions, threatening with weapons, etc.) are very infrequent; 5) The aggressor is predominantly male; 6) The aggressor is usually from the same class as the victim; 7) Most of the aggressions occur in the schoolyard; and 8) Students from the Basque Country who study 5th grade of Primary Education until 4th grade of Compulsory Secondary Education (10-16 years) have a similar rate of bullying as students from the rest of Spain and other countries, with a percentage of near 6% of victims in Primary Education and 4% in Secondary Education; as students grow older, intimidating behavior decreases, so that 5th and 6th grade of Primary Education are the courses with the highest rate of bullying and 3th and 4th grade of Compulsory Secondary Education have the lowest percentage.

METHOD

Participants

To perform the study, we selected a representative sample from the ACBC made up of 5,983 participants from 10 to 16 years of age, distributed in 169 centers. Of the total sample, 2,851 (52.7% male and 47.3% female) were students of the last cycle of

Chart 1. Percentages of aggressors and victims from a comparative European perspective.

Author- Date	Sample - (Age) - Place	Aggressors %	Victims %
Olweus, 1973	900 (12-15), Great Stockholm	10	10
Lagerspetz <i>et al.</i> , 1982	(12-16), Finland	5.5	3.9
Olweus, 1983	130,000 (7-16), Norway	7	9
Roland, 1989	(Primary), Norway	7.4	11.6
Yates & Smith, 1989	234 (13-15), United Kingdom	4	10
Vieira <i>et al.</i> , 1989	1,200 (8-12), Madrid (Spain)	4.7	3.1
		8,5	11
Kumpulainen <i>et al.</i> (1999), 1989	1.316 (mean 8.5), Knopio (Sweden)	+ 6.8 victim and aggressor	
Mellor, 1990	942 (12-16), Scotland	2	3
Ortega, 1992	859 (11-14), Sevilla (España)	22	26
(Ortega & Mora, 2000)	(14-16), Sevilla (España)	10	5
Cerezo & Esteban, 1992	317 (10-16), Murcia (España)	11.4	5.4
Boulton & Underwood, 1992	296 (8-12), United Kingdom	4	6
Whitney & Smith, 1993	6,758 (8-16), United Kingdom	7	14
		7.9	5.3
Kumpulainen <i>et al.</i> (1999), 1993	1,316 (mean 12.5), Knopio (Sweden)	+10.3 victim and aggressor	
Ortega, 1994	575 (14-16), Sevilla (España)	10	5
Byrne, 1994	1,302 (Primary-Secondary), Dublin (Ireland)	5.37	5.14
Ortega, 1997 (Ortega & Mora, 2000)	4,914 (9-18), Sevilla (España)	-	5.6 week 8.8 month
Orte <i>et al.</i> , 1999	3,033 (9-17), Baleares (España)	2.4 daily	4.5 daily
Avilés, 2002	731 (12-16), Valladolid (España)	5.9	5.7
Hernández <i>et al.</i> , 2002	603 (13-14), Navarra (España)	-	7 - 10
Orte, 2003	306 (3-16), Baleares (España)	4.6 daily	2.6 daily
Durán, 2003	1,750 (14-18), Granada (España)	-	23.1
Pera lta, 2004	Málaga (España)	-	7.1
Spiel & Atria, 2004	Austria	3 - 16	3 - 16
Sanmartín, 2005a	800 (12-16) Valencia (España)	7.6	3
Sanmartín, 2005b	42,800 (13-15) Community of Valencia (España)	2.4	10
Gómez <i>et al.</i> , 2005	535 (10-16), Aragón (España)	5.2	2.9 - 4.3
Educational Inspection, 2005 (Defensor del Pueblo, 2007)	1,053 (8-18), La Rioja (España)	-	3.6
Ramírez, 2006	587 (8-15), Ceuta (España)	4.1	7.4
Piñuel & Oñate, 2006	24,990 (7-18), (España)	-	23.3

Primary Education, 5th and 6th graders (10-12 years) from 88 schools, and 3,132 (50.2 male and 49.8% female) were students of Compulsory Secondary Education (12-16 years) from 81 institutes.

Instruments

Two assessment instruments were used to measure the variables of interest: 1) the School Violence Questionnaire: Peer Maltreatment in Compulsory Secondary Education (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000), which assesses the social relations and aggressive behaviors in a school center; and 2) the Checklist: My Life at School (Arora, 1987), which

measures the positive and negative behaviors among students and provides a bullying or victimization rate.

Procedure

The study used epidemiological methodology to analyze diverse characteristics, the incidence, and the rate of bullying or peer harassment in school at these developmental levels. After a first phase of selection and idiomatic adaptation of the assessment instruments, we selected a sample and trained the teachers who performed the assessment. Two assessment instruments were administered during the normal school schedule, anonymously and collectively in the computer classroom by means of an assisted on-line survey (by computer on the web).

RESULTS

As can be seen in Table 1, when asked “How well do you get on with your classmates?”, most of the students, both in primary (77.8%) and in Secondary Education (75.8%), said that they got on well with their classmates and they had many friends.

With regard to the students who admitted being witnesses, victims, or aggressors in each of the 13 aggressive behaviors assessed, different perceptions from the viewpoint of the three roles involved in the situations of peer bullying were observed (see Table 2).

The witnesses observed a higher number of aggressions than were perceived by the other two roles involved. This is because, obviously, several spectators can observe the same aggression. The incidence varied according to whether the students were identified as witnesses, victims, or aggressors. A very different incidence was observed depending on the type of maltreatment, which ranged from 8.4% in Primary Education, where students often feel themselves to be the victims of their classmates’ offensive nicknames, to 0.3% in Secondary Education, where students are often the victims of threats with weapons. Regarding the aggressors, a maximum percentage of 4.4% was observed to frequently speak ill of other classmates in Secondary Education and a minimum of 0.4% in Primary Education, who forced other classmates to do things by means of threats (see Table 2).

Table 1. Percentages of friendly relations in the school group (M= male; F= female).

	Primary (10-12 years)			Secondary (12-16 years)		
	M + F	M	F	M + F	M	F
I get on well and have many friends	77.8	78.8	76.8	75.8	75.6	76.0
I get on well with a lot of them, nobody in particular	15.8	15.0	16.7	17.3	17.5	17.1
I get on well with one or two friends	5.9	5.8	5.9	6.2	6.2	6.3
I have practically no friends	0.5	0.4	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6
<i>N</i>	2.851	1.503	1.348	3.132	1.573	1.559

Table 2. Percentage of students who admitted being a witness, a victim, or an aggressor many times in each one of the 13 aggressive behaviors assessed.

Type of behavior	I am a witness		I am a victim		I am an aggressor	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Ignoring	15.7	22.6	2.3	1.3	1.4	2.7
Not letting the other participate	23.0	18.6	3.2	1.9	1.7	1.5
Insulting	48.6	55.3	7.1	4.5	2.6	3.1
Insulting nicknames	33.9	49.3	8.4	5.5	1.8	3.3
Speaking ill of someone	36.1	49.4	5.9	4.9	2.7	4.4
Hiding things	17.4	24.2	3.1	1.8	0.6	1.0
Breaking things	6.6	9.6	1.4	0.8	0.9	0.5
Stealing things	8.5	12.9	1.7	1.7	0.4	0.6
Hitting	32.2	19.5	3.3	1.2	1.3	1.0
Frightening the other with threats	16.6	20.2	2.4	1.6	0.8	1.0
Sexually harassing	4.7	3.3	1.1	0.7	0.5	0.6
Making the other do things	4.5	3.8	1.0	0.4	0.4	0.5
Threatening with weapons	2.3	1.6	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.5

The kind of aggression most frequently perceived by all three roles involved was verbal aggression. The behavior most frequently observed by the witnesses was insulting, witnessed by 48.6% of the total of the students of Primary Education and 55.3% of those from Secondary Education. The behavior that the victims endured most frequently was receiving insulting nicknames, which affected 8.4% of all the students from Primary Education, and 5.5% of the Secondary students. The behavior most frequently performed by the aggressors was speaking ill of someone, carried out by 2.7% of all the Primary students and 4.4% of the Secondary students. The differences in the percentages among the three verbal aggressive behaviors perceived by each role were very small, but there was a large difference in the remaining behaviors (see Table 2).

Secondly, behaviors of social exclusion, such as ignoring or not letting the other classmate participate, occurred, and thirdly, physical aggression. Strangely enough, for the witnesses and the victims of Primary Education, "hitting" had a higher incidence than social exclusion. Hitting stood out because of its severity and the number of times it occurred, being among the most frequently reported. In this case, categories such as *a slap on the back of the head* or *beating up*, were not discriminated, but despite the fact that hitting might often refer to a *slap*, the intensity with which it occurs indicates the severity of the aggression. The numbers are high and the matter is serious. However, the severer the aggression, the more infrequent it is (see Table 2).

As can be observed in Table 3, the victims report that their aggressors are mainly males in all the kinds of behaviors except for speaking ill of someone, which is the only behavior that was reported more frequently among secondary female students.

For all the aggressive behaviors assessed, the students who suffered maltreatment by their classmates reported that the majority of the behaviors were carried out by a classmate (see Table 4).

Table 3. Percentage of victims who report the sex of their aggressors.

Type of behavior	Primary		Secondary	
	Male/s	Female/s	Male/s	Female/s
He/she ignores me	7.2	4.1	4.5	3.2
He/she doesn't let me participate	11.7	4.4	5.5	1.9
He/she insults me	22.3	4.1	16.3	2.5
He/she calls me by insulting nicknames	18.2	3.3	17.5	2.2
He/she speaks ill of me	10.6	8.9	8.8	10.1
He/she hides my things	8.5	3.3	7.4	2.4
He/she breaks my things	3.2	0.7	2.2	0.2
He/she steals my things	4.4	1.2	4.0	0.6
He/she hits me	14.5	1.5	4.8	0.4
He/she frightens me with threats	6.7	0.9	4.7	1.2
He/she harasses me sexually	2.3	0.6	1.2	0.3
He/she forces me to do things	1.3	0.4	0.7	0.3
He/she threatens me with weapons	1.5	0.1	0.5	0.0

Table 4. Percentage of the majority of the aggressors' place or origin, according to the victims.

Type of behavior	Primary			Secondary		
	Same class	Same course, different class	Higher course	Same class	Same course, different class	Higher course
He/she ignores me	8.9	2.2	2.6	7.3	2.0	1.6
He/she doesn't let me participate	11.6	4.0	2.7	6.0	1.8	1.0
He/she insults me	21.6	6.8	6.5	16.0	5.3	4.4
He/she calls me by insulting nicknames	18.5	5.1	3.6	17.7	5.2	3.8
He/she speaks ill of me	19.7	5.0	3.1	17.5	7.1	3.7
He/she hides my things	12.3	1.4	0.8	11.5	1.5	0.6
He/she breaks my things	3.7	0.9	0.5	2.6	0.4	0.3
He/she steals my things	5.4	1.1	0.5	4.7	1.1	0.5
He/she hits me	13.6	3.7	4.0	4.2	1.4	1.2
He/she frightens me with threats	5.3	1.8	2.4	3.7	1.6	1.8
He/she harasses me sexually	1.8	0.8	0.5	1.0	0.4	0.2
He/she forces me to do things	1.2	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.1
He/she threatens me with weapons	0.9	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.1	0.0

Table 5. Percentage of school scenarios where more aggressions take place, according to the victims.

Type of behavior	Primary		Secondary	
	Schoolyard	Classroom	Schoolyard	Classroom
He/ she ignores me	8.3	2.1	4.5	3.6
He/ she doesn't let me participate	14.7	2.5	4.6	3.3
He/ she insults me	19.0	5.4	9.1	8.7
He/ she calls me by insulting nicknames	13.1	6.1	7.7	10.5
He/ she speaks ill of me	13.2	3.6	8.6	6.2
He/ she hides my things	2.9	7.1	1.5	8.4
He/ she breaks my things	1.1	2.3	0.5	2.0
He/ she steals my things	1.6	3.8	0.5	4.9
He/ she hit me	11.4	2.1	2.7	2.0
He/ she frightens me with threats	4.6	1.6	2.2	2.0
He/ she harasses me sexually	1.4	0.5	0.5	0.7
He/ she forces me to do things	0.9	0.2	0.4	0.2
He/ she threatens me with weapons	0.9	0.1	0.3	0.1

Table 6. Percentage of intimidations suffered: Rate of bullying by sex and educational stage (M= male; F= female).

Number of different types of intimidating behaviors suffered	Primary Education (5 th and 6 th grade)			Compulsory Secondary Education (1 st , 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th grade)		
	M + F	M	F	M + F	M	F
0	94.1	93.9	94.4	96.4	95.4	97.4
1	3.8	3.7	4.0	2.4	2.7	2.0
2	0.9	1.0	0.8	0.8	1.1	0.4
3	0.6	0.9	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.1
4	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.0
5	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
6	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Bullying Rate	5.8	6.2	5.5	3.8	4.6	2.7

The schoolyard is the place where the episodes of maltreatment usually take place, followed by the classroom. However, aggressions against property (hiding, breaking, stealing objects) are carried out mainly in the classroom (see Table 5).

The results obtained with regard to the rate of bullying, by courses, educational stage, and as a function of sex are presented in Tables 6, 7, and 8.

As can be observed (see Table 6), in the last cycle of Primary Education, the rate of bullying or the percentage of victimization was of 5.8% and in Compulsory Secondary Education, it was 3.8%. Sixth grade of Primary Education was the course with the

Table 7. Rate of bullying by course in Primary Education.

Number of different types of intimidating behaviors suffered	5 th grade (10-11 years)		6 th grade (11-12 years)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
0	1.421	94.4	1.263	93.8
1	55	3.7	54	4.0
2	14	0.9	12	0.9
3	8	0.5	10	0.7
4	3	0.2	4	0.3
5	2	0.1	0	0.0
6	2	0.1	3	0.2
<i>N</i>	1.505	100	1.346	100
Bullying Rate		5.5		6.1

Table 8. Rate of bullying by course in Secondary Education.

Number of different types of intimidating behaviors suffered	1 st grade (12-13 years)		2 nd grade (13-14 years)		3 rd grade (14-15 years)		4 th grade (15-16 years)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
0	823	94.5	729	95.7	761	97.9	705	97.6
1	32	3.7	17	2.2	12	1.5	13	1.8
2	9	1.0	11	1.4	2	0.3	3	0.4
3	2	0.2	2	0.3	1	0.1	0	0.0
4	1	0.1	3	0.4	1	0.1	0	0.0
5	2	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.1
6	2	0.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<i>N</i>	871	100	762	100	777	100	722	100
Bullying Rate		5.4		4.3		2.0		2.3

highest rate of bullying, with 6.1%, followed by 5th grade with 5.5% (see Table 7). Next was Compulsory Secondary Education, 1st grade with 5.4%, 2nd grade with 4.3%, 4th grade with 2.2%, and, lastly, 3rd grade with 2% (see Table 8). With regard to sex (see Table 6), there were hardly any differences in Primary Education: males had a rate of 6.2% compared to 5.5% in the females. In Secondary Education, the males had a somewhat higher rate of bullying, 4.6% compared to 2.7% in the females. This means that in Secondary Education, more victims were observed among the males with regard to the kinds of intimidating behaviors measured.

DISCUSSION

Taking into account that this kind of epidemiological work may lead to a feeling of negativity and pessimism and the inference that “children, adolescents, and school equal problems,” we see the need to underscore, firstly, the most remarkable result, that

is, that the general atmosphere and the human relations at school are mostly positive. Our results reveal that the great majority of the students are neither the recipients nor the perpetrators of harassing behaviors, they get on well with their classmates, and report having many friends. These data ratify Hypothesis 1, which proposed that the great majority of students feel well treated by their classmates. Moreover, they are in accordance with other studies (Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 2000).

The results also reveal that the incidence of bullying varies depending on whether the students are identified as witnesses, victims, or perpetrators of the abuses. The victims of Primary Education were shown to be the only ones who perceive aggressions with more frequency; the rest, both the Secondary students and the aggressors of both educational stages perceive similar incidences. Therefore, we confirm Hypothesis 2, which stated that both victims and aggressors perceive the incidence of the harassment with similar frequency, except for the victims from Primary Education, because victimization is higher at this educational stage. Moreover, we confirm that insulting is the behavior most frequently observed by witnesses, whereas the behavior most frequently reported by the victims is receiving offensive nicknames. Speaking ill of others is the behavior most frequently reported by the aggressors. These results are in agreement with those of other studies (Defensor del Pueblo, 2000; Avilés, 2002; Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 2000), and they confirm Hypothesis 3, which states that the most frequent aggression is verbal. The study of the Defensor del Pueblo (2000) is also along these lines; it observed that the most severe types of behaviors -sexual harassment, forcing someone to do things, threatening with weapons- have the lowest incidence, thus ratifying Hypothesis 4, according to which, the severer the aggressive behavior, the more infrequently it is expressed. However, it should be taken into account that hitting, stealing, etcetera can be either severe or minor behaviors depending on the amount and the quality. This latter factor was not assessed in the questionnaire used in this study.

In addition, the results confirm that the aggressor is predominantly a male from the same class as the victim, and that most of the aggressions take place in the schoolyard, which confirms Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7, respectively. These results are similar to those reported in the work of the Defensor del Pueblo (2000) and of Ortega and Mora-Merchán (2000).

The result of the incidence shows that peer violence that occurs among Primary and Secondary students in the ACBC is a reality that, while not alarming, should at least be taken into account. This kind of perverse relations exists in all the centers; situations of abuse and maltreatment are a fact in all schools, and all the different kinds of maltreatment have been acknowledged, although evidently not in every center and not at the same level of incidence. All the studies reflect this phenomenon, as noted by Cerezo (2001), the Defensor del Pueblo (2000), Díaz-Aguado, Martínez, and Martín (2004), and Ortega and Mora-Merchán (2000). The rate of bullying obtained with *The Checklist: My life at school* (Arora, 1987) was of 5.8% in Primary Education and of 3.8% in Secondary Education. These are the percentages of victims who have suffered one or various intimidating behaviors more than once a week. The higher the course, the fewer aggressions occur, as the students grow older, there are fewer violent conflicts among them.

The results show that the incidence perceived by the students of the ACBC is similar to that found in other investigations, although it should be taken into account that the assessment instruments and the students' age vary. Thus, our findings confirm the data provided by other studies carried out in Spain (Avilés, 2002; Cerezo & Esteban, 1992; Gómez *et al.*, 2005; Orte *et al.*, 1999; Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 2000; Sanmartín, 2005a; Defensor del Pueblo, 2007; Viera *et al.*, 1989) and also other studies in European countries (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Byrne, 1994; Kumpulainen *et al.*, 1999; Lagerspetz *et al.*, 1982; Mellor, 1990; Olweus, 1983). Thus, all these results confirm Hypothesis 8, which indicated that students from the Basque Country who study 5th grade of Primary Education until the 4th grade of Compulsory Secondary Education (10-16 years) have a bullying rate similar to that of students from the rest of Spain and from other countries, with an approximate percentage of 6% of victims in Primary Education and 4% in Secondary Education. As students' age increases, the intimidating behaviors decrease, so that 5th and 6th grades of Primary Education are the courses with the highest rates of bullying, whereas 3rd, and 4th, grades of Compulsory Secondary Education have a lower percentage.

Although it is difficult to establish a comparison with the results obtained in other studies, most of the conclusions of this work are coherent with those elaborated by the other researchers quoted. The same questionnaire was used as the one employed by the Defensor del Pueblo (2000) in his investigation in Spain, and the general results are not significantly different. Therefore, the final conclusion is that the ACBC does not stand out in any aspect with regard to the incidence of the phenomenon of bullying compared to the generality of the studies of other communities and countries.

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