

# SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS PROTECTIVE AGAINST BULLYING IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

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**Purpose:** Bullying has long-term detrimental effects on the mental and physical health of early adolescents. Rural adolescents may be at particular risk because their communities have fewer resources to combat bullying. For these adolescents, schools may be an important resource. We examine the influence of parent and school connectedness on experiences of bullying among middle school students in a rural Midwestern county.

**Methods:** Sixth to eighth grade students completed surveys in health classes in a rural Midwestern, low-to-middle income school district. Outcome measures included: (1) social bullying (3-items, e.g., “Have you been excluded from a group or completely ignored?”,  $\alpha=0.786$ ), (2) physical bullying (1-item, e.g., “Has someone hurt you physically?”) and, (3) electronic bullying (2-items; e.g., “Had anyone used your username or screen-name to spread rumors or lies about someone else?”). All bullying items had a 5-point response scale ranging from never-several times/week. Predictor variables included: gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation (heterosexual/sexual minority), grade level (6th/7th/8th), parent connectedness (5-items, range: 0-20,  $\alpha=.922$ , e.g., “How close do you feel to...?”) and school connectedness (5-items, range: 5-20,  $\alpha=.799$ , e.g., “I feel close to people at my school”). Three ordinal logistic regressions were used to estimate the effect of parent- and school-connectedness on experiencing the different types of bullying, controlling for gender, sexual orientation and grade level (SPSS, 25.0). The study was IRB approved.

**Results:** We recruited 1319 participants, 51% male, 8.3% sexual minority, 52% Latinx, 37% White, 11% other or mixed race, and mean (SD) age =12.5 (SD1.0). Social bullying was most commonly reported by students (50%), followed by physical (24%) and electronic bullying (15%). Social bullying was more common with female students (OR=2.58, CI=2.04-3.26) and less common among Latinx students (OR=0.60, CI=0.47-0.76), 7th (OR=0.72, CI=0.54-0.96) and 8th graders (OR=0.73, CI=0.55-0.97), and among students who reported higher school connectedness (OR=0.85, CI=0.81-0.88). Sexual orientation and parent connectedness were not significant. Physical bullying was less common among Latinx students (OR=0.70, CI=0.51-0.97) and lower with increased parent (OR=0.95, CI=0.92-0.98) and school connectedness (OR=0.89,

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CI=0.85-0.94). Gender, sexual orientation and grade were not significant. Electronic bullying was more common among female (OR=3.08, CI=2.25-4.21) and sexual minority students (OR=1.74, CI=1.06-2.86), and less common among students who reported higher school connectedness (OR=0.84, CI=0.80-0.88). Grade and parent connectedness were not significant.

**Conclusions:** Bullying was common among rural middle school youth. School connectedness was protective against all bullying types, whereas parent connectedness was only protective against physical bullying. Higher rates of social and electronic bullying among girls and sexual minority youth are consistent with known patterns; however, the protective effects of Latinx ethnicity in this rural context deserves further exploration. These data emphasize the importance of creating safe and supportive learning environments for diverse youth.

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