



## **Research Briefing: Bullying and the Community**

To date, little research has been carried out which explores the degree of childhood bullying that takes place in the community. In this sense, community refers to any place outside of the school or home environment, which is frequented by children, with or without the presence of onlooking adults. Traditionally, most research into bullying has focused on working in schools, and little attention has been paid to that which occurs outside of the school ground. This briefing reviews the few studies so far that specifically examine bullying in the community context, contrasting psychological, social and geographical literature to interpret the findings of these studies, and addressing future priorities for assessing and preventing community based bullying. The majority of research cited in this review is based in the UK; where necessary, studies outside of Britain have been used, but are labelled accordingly.

### **Young people's use of public space**

Before examining how and where bullying takes place outside of the home or school domains, it is first necessary to establish how children make use of the environment and their free time; looking at places where children 'hang out', the social groups they mix with, and the interactions that occur in the wider environment. Various literature has explored 'children's geographies', through which localities frequented by young people can be pinpointed. Such research identifies places in which they spend their free time and the ways in which they socialise with one another. Moore (1986) divides localities into two categories. Formal areas are places created and maintained by adults with the purpose of providing communal areas where children will be in a safe and monitored environment; such places can include parks, playgrounds or leisure centres. Informal areas are places visited by children, but not specifically set aside to meet their needs; these can include alleys or side streets, small woodland areas, or unused wastelands.

Matthews, Limb and Taylor (1999) surveyed 1087 British young people, between the ages of 9 and 16, to examine their activities away from home, and the areas in which they socialised outside of school. The researchers found the majority of respondents (82%) preferred being outside than spending time at home. Rather than spending time in formal areas, set aside for them to mix, young people chose their own localities in which to gather, with most spending their time in streets, shopping centres or urban wastelands. The streets local to their neighbourhood were the areas most commonly frequented, a third of respondents using these places to meet with friends.

Gender has an effect on children's use of community areas. In general, research suggests that girls are more restricted in terms of areas they are allowed to visit outside of school hours (Mayall, 2002). This results from both parental influences and personal knowledge of local areas. Parents of British 8 to 11 year olds were surveyed on their attitudes towards

allowing their sons or daughters to go out in the community alone. They showed a greater protectiveness towards their daughters, enforcing heavier restrictions upon areas they were allowed to visit, and lessening the amount of time they were allowed to stay away from home (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997). Additionally, as found through self reports from British young people, girls show greater worry of being alone in the community than do same age boys. When asking boys aged between 10 and 14 about their fears on being alone in the community, the most referred to danger was traffic, while same aged girls more often reported fear of assault or abduction as their greatest phobia (Matthews, 2003). O'Brien et al., (2000) found differences between genders when asking 10 to 14 year old children where they enjoyed going outside of school, with girls reporting feeling safer in areas which were well monitored by adults. Female children therefore appear to be both more restricted in terms of localities they can visit, but also more aware of the dangers they face.

Gender is not the only factor in children's perception of their safety away from school or home. The socio economic status of the surrounding community and levels of poverty can impact on children safety. Petrie et al., (2000), in a study on British 10-13 year olds, found both male and female young people living in socially disadvantaged areas did not feel safe within their local community.

One particular aspect of research into children's geographies concerns the concept of 'microgeographies' (see Matthews, Limb & Percy-Smith, 1998). This term refers to the spatial cultures of young people; and encompasses the diverse identities of groups of young people, the localities in which they meet, and the collective experiences that occur within such places, between one or more groups. The areas frequented by groups of young people reflect the cultural values and social identity of those that spend time there, with the area often being marked, such as through graffiti, to highlight the symbolic and cultural significance that this locality has for those young people (Matthews et al., 1999). Such forms of localisation mean young people become inextricably linked to a certain area, and stake an informal claim of ownership over it. Conflict occurs when two or more groups of young people, each with their own individual symbolic and cultural identities, frequent the same area, leading to a multilayering of microgeographies. The rivalry between contesting groups can lead to intra group bullying and violence, as each group aims to claim sole ownership over the contested space. This concept is important in understanding community bullying, because, as will be discussed next, victimisation in the community can differ in its forms and intended impact from bullying that takes place within school grounds.

### **Bullying within the community**

Most research on bullying among children and young people has taken place within schools. There are a variety of reasons for this, including the immediate access researchers have to a 'captive audience' of young people, and the ease of obtaining consent without having to contact each child's parent. A downside to this is that bullying is typified by those actions that occur in school, notably acts of physical, verbal or relational aggression taking place against a victim who is unable to defend themselves. Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) assessed community bullying by giving questionnaires to 181 young people, aged between 10 and 15. The researchers found community based victimisation to differ in its forms from bullying within school, identifying four main characteristics through which young people can be targeted:

- Barging in – a group of young people, typically older than the victims, forcefully involve themselves in activities with another group of children, with the ultimate intent of disrupting or taking over control. This was particularly prominent within sports

games, where participants recalled such events happening during games of football, in which an older group would forcefully join in their game, and proceed to take control of the pitch, dispelling the younger group from their game.

- Extortion – coercing or threatening children into engaging in behaviour against their will. This can take the form of forcefully taking items from a child, such as money or sweets, or alternatively, children can be coerced into acts of anti-social behaviour which they would not typically carry out, for example stealing items from a local shop.
- Intimidation – young people are assaulted or intimidated by their assailants, often for no specific reason, except as a means of enjoyment and amusement for another group.
- Name calling – a young person is verbally intimidated, with or without reason, is the form of victimisation that bears the closest resemblance most reported in school bullying.

After providing an insight into the forms of community bullying, the researchers then provide data on the prevalence of community based victimisation, contrasting results between young people living in either inner city or suburban areas.

Firstly, a greater number of inner city children reported seeing bullying taking place than suburban children (57% and 42% respectively). Similarly, more inner city children had experienced being bullied than children from the suburbs (46% and 27% respectively). The authors suggest this may be due to a limited amount of space and recreational areas within inner cities, resulting in groups of young people being brought into close proximity. Age and size of group appear to be key factors. 87% of inner city children, and 70% of those from suburban areas, reported that the people victimising them were either older children, or in groups.

Most of the bullying that took place outside of school could be localised to a few areas, most commonly parks, shopping centres and streets. Children living in the inner city area were more likely to be victimised in shopping centres (29% compared to 10% of suburban children) and in the streets nearby their homes (68% compared to 25% among suburban children), while young people living away from the centre showed greater rates of victimisation in parks (36% and 20% respectively). These are informal areas, where supervision by adults is not continuous, so that children are free to indulge in their own activities without fear of reprisals from teachers, parents or carers.

The study also revealed marked differences between genders. Girls experienced less bullying outside of school than did boys, both in inner city and suburban areas. Within the city, 64% of boys reported being bullied compared to 36% of girls, while in suburban areas, 55% of boys had been bullied, and 45% of girls. This finding can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, by looking at research such as that by Matthews (2003) or O'Brien et al., (2000), girls appear to be less likely to go to public places alone for fear of being victimised. Therefore, if girls are present to a lesser degree than boys, then a lower rate of victimisation among them would be expected. An alternative explanation follows findings from research into school bullying which show bullying among girls to be more relational or indirect than physical, taking place through rumour spreading and social isolation (Smith & Sharp, 1994). The forms of community bullying discussed, such as barging in, extortion and name calling, are more physical or direct in their approach. It may be that bullying outside of school is equally common among girls, but is of a more discreet nature, and can be researched less easily than physically observable acts.

## **The relationship between school and community bullying**

Little research has specifically investigated the relationship between school and community bullying. Some researchers have examined the extent to which school based violence is dependent upon the socio economic status of the surrounding neighbourhood, based on the presumption that violence within schools is a reflection of a violent community which exists outside the school gates (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Similarly, factors relating to the family such as domestic violence, and parenting styles can also impact on the individual level of aggression exhibited by a child (Schwartz et al., 1997, Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998).

The school itself may affect the levels of violence within it, brought about by certain factors such as large school size, small amounts of resources or low levels of staffing (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985, Anderson, 1998, Welsh, 2000). This contrasting literature therefore appears to suggest that school and community victimisation may result from a combination of all these factors, and cannot be solely attributed to either the individual, the school or the surrounding community. Benbenishty and Astor (2005) propose a hierarchical model on the nature of school based aggression. They suggest violence is a result of many factors stemming from multiple levels. At the centre lie the individual characteristics of the child. This in turn is influenced by the school context, the family context, the neighbourhood context, and finally the cultural context. Research carried out on Israeli children supported this model. The authors found wide variations in the levels of violence between schools. While some of this variation could be attributed to within school factors, this alone was not sufficient to account for all variation, and family, neighbourhood and cultural contexts played an intrinsic part in the levels of violence recorded within each school. Bullying in the school and community therefore appear to be linked, and it could be assumed that if a school exhibits high levels of violence, similar levels of aggression can be found in the surrounding community. This poses the question; to what degree does bullying happening within the school affect that which takes place within the community?

A novel study set in New York (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2003), used a longitudinal design to follow incidents of aggression witnessed by a small number of students, aged between 12 and 15. Individual conflicts were allocated to four categories, school to neighbourhood, neighbourhood to school, school to school and neighbourhood to neighbourhood; each highlighting the origin of the conflict, and the location in which it took place. Incidents which started and ended at school were most common, 48%; but 21% started in the neighbourhood but took place in the school, while 18% started in the school, but took place in the neighbourhood; conflicts starting and ending in the neighbourhood were the least common (13%). This study shows school and community violence are interrelated, and the influence appears bi-directional. No further research that we know of has attempted to replicate such findings.

However, the recent rise of research into cyberbullying (bullying carried out through the use of mobile phones or computers) shows that it transcends school and community boundaries. A key aspect of cyberbullying is that the victim has no place to hide from the perpetrator. Therefore, should a child stay at home to try and avoid being victimised within the school or community, they are still accessible through the internet or their mobile phone, and can continue to be a target for bullies in any place, at any time. Smith et al (2007) contrasted rates of cybervictimisation through 7 forms of media technology, such as text messages, emails and picture or video clips on mobile phones. The researchers found the incidence of cyberbullying was, in most cases, more common outside of school than inside school. However, in 57% of cases the victim of bullying, knew the perpetrator(s) came from their school (and in 49% of cases, their class or year group). Thus, even if messages are sent and/or received out of school, often the problems will come back to the school the next day. It appears that, particularly in cases of bullying of an individual, the boundaries

between school and private life become less distinguishable, and bullying which originates in the schoolyard can extend into other areas of a young person's social life.

### **Future research needs and anti-bullying interventions**

The lack of information on the degree and form of bullying that takes place in the community highlights the need for research to examine this further. Only a few studies have directly addressed this issue, and many findings have not been replicated or even supported by further work in the area. Research is beginning to pay attention to community based bullying, and a new toolkit produced by the Anti Bullying Alliance will soon be made available to schools. The pack includes questionnaires which can provide detailed information on school and community bullying, assessing forms, rates and frequency of victimization, along with information on young people's attitudes to safety both inside and outside of school. Data obtained through using these questionnaires can provide substantial insight into the characteristics of, and reasons behind, bullying in the community.

As well as increased assessment of community bullying, attention clearly needs to be paid to ways in which such victimisation can be prevented. Providing effective interventions is clearly a major problem. School based interventions have the ability to make use of a wide range of resources, including staff training, school counsellors, and the education of students about the danger of bullying through PHSE lessons and whole school policies. Adult supervision is also present for much of the time within schools. Preventing bullying in the community is a harder problem to address. Adults are not often on hand to interrupt incidents they witness, and whole school policies, although addressing the serious consequences of bullying, do not apply to the outside world. The most typical strategy used by victims of bullying in the community is avoidance. Percy-Smith and Matthews (2001) found that among children bullied in the community, 11% of those from the inner city, and 15% of those from suburban areas had changed their behaviour as a result of these incidents. This most commonly involved staying away from areas where problems occurred, and employing similar avoidance strategies against young people who repeatedly victimised them. However, avoiding such areas deprives young people of their right to use public space freely without fear of victimisation, and interventions should be available to make the community a safer place.

At present few large scale strategies exist to prevent or resolve community bullying. Beatbullying (<http://www.beatbullying.org/>) have produced a series of toolkits for a wide range of professionals and carers which advise on preventing community bullying. A large scale project is also being carried out in London under the title 'Bully Watch London' which encourages adults and young people who witness bullying in the community to take action safely, or report it to relevant authorities. Through the dissemination of posters, leaflets and packages for the school and home, this campaign aims to increase knowledge of bullying among children and adults within London, providing advice on how bystanders can take an active stance, and how best to provide support for victims of community bullying. (Full details can be found at: [www.bullyingwatchlondon.org](http://www.bullyingwatchlondon.org) )

Bullying in the community is clearly a problem which warrants immediate and detailed attention. The scarcity of literature addressing it highlights the difficulty that comes from attempting to understand such a topic, but the findings from those few studies that do investigate it, show victimization in the community to be a serious problem for a significant number of young children. Undoubtedly, community bullying is a serious problem which needs to be both understood and prevented. Through further research, and the development of appropriate intervention programmes, the external environment can hopefully be made a safer and worry free place for children.

This briefing was written by the ABA Research & Evaluation Team (based at the Unit for School and Family Studies, Goldsmith College), and was funded by the Department for Education and Skills.

May 2007

## References

- Anderson, D. (1998) *Curriculum, culture and community: The challenge of school violence*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press
- Benbenishty, R. & Avi Astor, R. (2005) *School violence in context: Culture, neighbourhood, family, school and gender*. New York. Oxford University Press
- Gottfredson, G.D. & Gottfredson, D.C. (1985) *Victimization in schools*. New York. Plenum Press
- Mateu-Gelabert, P. & Lune, H. (2003) School violence: The bi-directional conflict flow between neighbourhood and school. *City and Community*, 2, 353-369
- Matthews, H. (2003) The street as a liminal space: The barbed spaces of childhood. In P. Christensen & M. O'Brien (Eds.), *Children in the city: Home, neighbourhood and community*. London. RoutledgeFalmer
- Matthews, H., Limb, M. & Percy-Smith, B. (1998) Changing worlds: The microgeographies of young teenagers. *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 89, 193-202
- Matthews, H., Limb, M. & Taylor, M. (1999) *Reclaiming the street: The discourse of curfew*. Environment and Planning A, 31, 1713-1730
- Mayall, B. (2002) *Towards a sociology for childhood: Thinking from children's lives*. London. Open University Press
- Moore, R.C. (1986) *Childhood's domain: Play and play space in child development*. California, MIG Communications.
- O'Brien, M., Jones, D., Sloan, D. & Rustin, M. (2000) Children's independent spatial mobility in the urban public realm. *Childhood*, 7, 257-277
- Percy-Smith, B. & Matthews, H. (2001) Tyrannical spaces: Young people, bullying and urban neighbourhoods. *Local Environment*, 6, 49-63.
- Petrie, P., Egharevba, I., Oliver, C. & Poland, G. (2000) *Out-of-school lives, out-of-school services*. London, The Stationary Office
- Schwartz, D., Dodge, K.A., Pettit, G.S. & Bates, J.E. (1997) The early socialization of aggressive victims of bullying. *Child Development*, 68, 665-675
- Smith, P.K., Mahdavi, J., Carvalho, M. & Tippett, N. (2005) *An investigation into cyberbullying: Its forms, awareness and impact, and the relationship between age and gender*. Research Brief No. RBX03-06. DfES, London

Smith, P.K. & Myron-Wilson, R. (1998) Parenting and school bullying. *Clinical child psychology and psychiatry*, 3, 405-417

Smith, P.K. & Sharp, S. (1994) *School bullying: Insights and perspectives*. New York, Routledge.

Valentine, G. & McKendrick, J. (1997) Children's outdoor play: Exploring parental concerns about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood. *Geoforum*, 28, 219-235

Welsh, W.N. (2000) The effects of school climate on school disorder. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 567, 88-107