

Bullying more violent in school with gangs nearby, study finds

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(Phys.org) —The presence of gangs in the vicinity of schools creates a pervasive climate of fear and victimization among students, teachers and administrators that escalates the level of aggression in bullying incidents and paralyzes prevention efforts, suggests a new study in the journal *Psychology of Violence*.

Gang presence causes incidents of victimization toward [students](#) and teachers to become more violent. And, fearing for their own safety, bystanders, teachers and administrators adopt a laissez faire attitude toward [bullying](#) that perpetuates a culture of victimization, the researchers say.

Based upon interviews with students and the researchers' observations, the study examined the influence that gang presence is having on bullying at one middle school in the Midwest, identified by the pseudonym Thompson Middle School in the study. Thompson is located in a [rural community](#) with more than 20 gangs and 2,000 known members.

The current study was part of a larger project funded by the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) that examined links between bullying and [sexual violence](#). Bullying expert Dorothy L. Espelage, who is an educational psychologist at the University of Illinois, led that research.

In analyzing the data for the sexual violence project, the researchers encountered several themes at Thompson Middle School that were

strikingly different from the other four schools in the case study. Anjali Forber-Pratt, who was then a doctoral student and graduate researcher on the sexual violence project, decided to examine the themes at Thompson in greater depth and produced the current study, with Espelage as one of her co-authors.

"Fear permeates the school environment, affecting both students and teachers," Forber-Pratt said. "We believe as a research team that this permeation of fear possibly paralyzes bullying prevention efforts. At a very significant and practical level, school staff and administrators need to recognize that gang presence does have an influence on behaviors in schools."

Physical or direct bullying is much more prevalent and more violent in nature at Thompson than at the other schools, escalating from the everyday occurrences of "regular obnoxious bullying" – such as name-calling, rumor-spreading and punching – seen at most schools to far more serious incidents.

Interviews with 10 Thompson students provide a glimpse into an environment besieged with violence and intimidation, where children are in a perpetual "fight or flight state" and feel isolated and unsafe before, during and after school.

Many of the children interviewed struggle with a disparity between parental expectations about how they should respond to bullying and perceptions that reporting incidents to teachers would provoke retaliation and stigmatization as a snitch.

"One of the comments that we hear in schools with gang presence is 'snitching leads to stitches,' " Forber-Pratt said.

Facing "substantial pressure" to join gang life and possible harm or death

if they resist, some students capitulate because they perceive gangs as providing safety, peer support and a sense of family. These deep bonds, pressures about loyalty and the hierarchical power structure of gangs "convolute" bystander and peer influence on victimization, making it far less likely that gang members or other [bystanders](#) will intervene on [victims'](#) behalf.

Other students, called "gang wannabes" by peers, feign holding positions of influence in gangs to protect themselves from victimization while bullying younger students and behaving aggressively with teachers.

Students feel trapped, powerless and fearful and view their teachers in a similar light – reluctant to intervene in bullying incidents out of concern for their own safety and because they lack effective disciplinary measures and support from administrators.

Bullies specifically target teachers verbally and by damaging their cars, prompting them to ignore issues out of fear, children said.

"In order to chip away at that reluctance of students and staff to actively participate in promoting safe schools, we need open communication and dialogue with staff, teachers and administrators to understand what's happening outside of the school among these neighborhood gangs," Forber-Pratt said. "Whatever is happening on the streets, it's going to affect the [school environment](#), and it's going to affect the attitudes and behaviors, and that's a reality. We really need to explain to teachers, administrators and to folks who care that having that sort of clear expectation that gang influence stops at the school doors could really create a level of trust with students.

"It's not to ignore that gangs exist but to recognize the pressure kids are under to join the gangs, and to help students build courage and that desire to play an active role in their learning and resist membership in

gangs. As educators and responsible citizens, it's our duty to try to address the problem of bullying and the concerns raised by the stories that we learned from this study so that students don't feel isolated and threatened each day at school."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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