

Bullying targets popular kids, not only those who are marginalized

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Bullying affects more than just isolated and marginalized students, according to sociologists. In fact, researchers have found that relatively popular students are targeted and may actually suffer more from a single act of social aggression.

"We did find that students who are isolated do get bullied," said Diane Felmlee, professor of sociology, Penn State. "However, for most students, the likelihood of being targeted by aggressive acts increases as a student becomes more popular, with the exception of those at the very top."

In a study of students and their friendship networks in 19 North Carolina schools, the [researchers](#) found that the risk of being bullied drops dramatically only for the adolescents in the top five percent of the school's social strata.

Bullying may be a tactical form of aggression, according to the researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of *American Sociological Review*. Young people who are attempting to climb in status may increase their risk of victimization.

"When youth are vying for status, they probably gain little from attacking students who are already marginalized—in fact, it might backfire," said Felmlee, who worked with Robert Faris, associate professor, University of California Davis. "But, if adolescents put down someone who is trying to be a leader in their group, or who constitutes a

threat to their status, then there is a lot more to be gained."

Faris and Felmlee also found that girls are more likely to be victims of both male and female bullies. Girls who date are at increased risk of physical violence.

"Girls may pose particular threats to other female students' social standing and represent potential rivals when it comes to securing a boyfriend," said Felmlee. "For boys, girls who date represent rewarding, often popular and relatively easy targets who are unlikely to retaliate physically."

Students who have an aggressive friend tend to avoid being victimized. This may be further evidence that bullying is rarely an individual act, but associated with how friends establish and maintain hierarchies by protecting their own, according to the researchers.

There are serious costs associated with bullying over time, Felmlee said. Victims suffer elevated levels of anxiety, depression and anger. They tend to develop negative feelings about their schools, as well.

Bullying's detrimental effects can be even more pronounced among relatively popular students, according to the researchers. Higher status students experienced significantly larger increases in depression, anxiety and anger than low-status students. The friendships of these students also deteriorated.

"The effects of social aggression were magnified by the student's friendship status," said Felmlee. "It may be that the kids who are extremely popular and rarely victimized had farther to fall than those more accustomed to being a target, so, although socially vulnerable youth suffer significantly from frequent harassment, more central victims of bullying, those who may be 'hidden in plain sight' face serious

consequences."

The researchers examined data from the Context of Adolescent Substance Use study, which surveyed about 4,200 middle and [high school students](#) twice during the school year. The surveys included questions on serious verbal and physical harassment, but did not include minor incidents, such as playful teasing. The students were asked to provide information about their friendships, as well as information about [students](#) whom they believe they harassed and about those who they believe harassed them.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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