



# Media coverage and issue visibility: State legislative responses to school bullying

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 June 2013

Received in revised form 10 April 2014

Accepted 11 April 2014

Available online 6 May 2014

### Keywords:

State politics

Education policy

Media coverage

Issue saliency

Diffusion

## ABSTRACT

Dealing with the schoolyard bully is an age-old problem; however, legislators have only recently tackled it at the state level. This study examines the adoption of anti-bullying policies from the policy diffusion and innovation perspective with an emphasis on the role of print media coverage. The study contributes to the policy diffusion literature by examining both national and local media coverage as conduits for diffusion and adds to the expanding views of the diffusion process beyond the traditional geographic proximity argument. Further, it provides the first examination of an emerging policy area important to education policy scholars. The findings show issue saliency via national media coverage drives policy adoption beyond any geographic proximity.

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2011, President Obama joked about his “own big ears and funny name” at a White House summit to address growing concerns about bullying and to launch a six-department federal initiative to deal with the issue (Calmes, 2011). This federal response follows 49 states that adopted anti-bullying policies during the previous decade. School officials and lawmakers have a moral and concurrent legal obligation to protect children in their schools and go to great lengths to protect children from potential dangers that exist in schools. A school culture must provide for the security and safety of its students and employees or run the risk of shortchanging their students by failing

to provide a fair and equitable opportunity to learn and experience academic growth.

In the aftermath of incidents such as Columbine and other acts of school violence, school officials and lawmakers focused more on methods to protect children through various policy and legislative initiatives (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). As such, one important step has been to pass state statutes designed to reduce the prevalent problem of bullying in schools, to punish perpetrators, and offer protections to victims of bullying.

While education scholars have investigated the role of bullying interventions in schools, there is much less knowledge the policy and political aspects of this issue. This paper examines the states’ responses to school safety through the enactment of anti-bullying policies. The purpose of this paper is to address an on-going debate in the policy diffusion literature, specifically challenging the traditional view of a geographic relationship for policy diffusion in the case where media attention raises the saliency of the policy. This study demonstrates the pivotal role media can play in the spread of policy across the country. Specifically, the

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national media can have a significant role in the diffusion process in emerging policy areas that gain a lot of non-partisan attention in a relatively short time span. Bullying makes an ideal test of this theory, especially at the state level. It is also worth noting what this paper does not argue or test. First, the success or failure of these policies is not examined; it is the determinants of a state passing legislation in this area. In fact, passing bullying legislation by the states may be nothing more than an exercise in symbolic politics. However, this does not mean it is a costless exercise or an unimportant one, regardless of the impact of the law. Passing a policy establishes it on the legislature's agenda and provides a starting point for attention to the issue. Second, while the paper examines anti-bullying policy adoption, the real purpose is the interesting test case this makes for understanding the role of media coverage in a policy's diffusion across the country; it is not about the effects of these policies.

Specifically, this study looks at the public policy aspects of this process by analyzing the influences on the adoption and diffusion of the policies across the country. First, the background on the bullying issue across the country is provided followed by a theoretical framework with a focus on the role of issue saliency via print media coverage and issue complexity within the innovation and diffusion literature. Next is the analysis with an overview of the data and the event history analysis (EHA) models used before turning to the results and discussion. The findings indicate national print media coverage raises the saliency of the issue and is an important determinant of policy adoption while traditional geographic variables do not explain the diffusion of the policy adoption across the country. The study concludes with a discussion of the contribution of these findings for studies of policy adoption and diffusion and for future research into bullying policy.

The main contribution of this study is a more complete understanding of the role of media coverage in policy adoption and diffusion. Building from previous studies, the findings show non-geographic factors, such as issue visibility vis-à-vis media coverage, can trump the traditional arguments of geographic proximity when a policy is newly emerging on the political scene without a clear partisan or ideological division. This forces states to consider the growing scope of the problem, specifically when national coverage becomes a dominant factor in the issue's salience.

## 2. Background

Bullying among school-aged youth is a serious problem in the United States and around the world. Bullying in schools has been around as long as schools and playgrounds have existed (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Statistics for bullying vary, but recent statistics on levels of bullying estimate that almost 30% of youth in the United States are involved in bullying as either a bully or a target of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). In 2003, Limber and Small reported that bullying among school-aged children had not been a topic of significant concern in the past; however, with incidents such as Columbine in 1999 and more recent tragedies of bully-related suicides, such as Megan Meier, Phoebe Prince, and Tyler Clementi, attention has

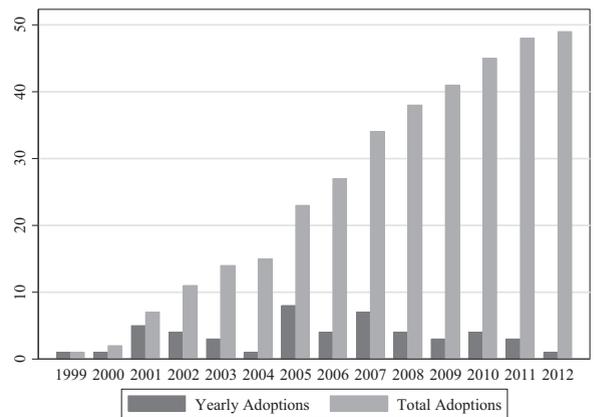


Fig. 1. State anti-bullying policy adoptions, 1999–2012.

Sources: Data collected by the authors from various sources including <http://www.bullypolice.org/> and <http://www.stopbullying.gov/laws>.

dramatically increased among school officials, the general public, and policymakers. The wake of these much-publicized teen suicides has brought about a clarion call for school officials and policymakers alike. The reported linkages of bullying to incidences of school violence and suicides has increased interest in the problem of school bullying and moved the issue into the public policy realm. Given the importance of the problem, researchers have completed numerous studies on anti-bullying programs in the United States and across the world (Lumsden, 2002), but scholars have focused much less on legislative attempts to address this problem.

As awareness of bullying and harassment in schools has grown, state legislatures began to address the problem as well. In 1999, Georgia became the first state to adopt a bullying policy in the aftermath of the Columbine shootings in Colorado and the death of a Georgia student directly linked to bullies (Conrad, 2004). As Fig. 1 shows, after Georgia's initial passage, anti-bullying legislation spread across the country quickly with a quarter of the states adopting a policy by 2003 and over half by 2006. Within a decade, over 80% of the states had adopted bullying legislation with the largest single years of adoption occurring in 2005 and 2007. Michigan and South Dakota ended almost decade-long efforts to pass such legislation in December of 2011 and March 2012, respectively, leaving only Montana with no state law on bullying.

## 3. Theory

To help explain the spread of anti-bullying policies, this study examines traditional theories of policy adoption, innovation, and diffusion (Berry & Berry, 1999) with a focus on the role of policy salience and issue complexity (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009). Policy diffusion is the process of communicating innovation through various actors involved in the policy process (Rogers, 1962). Most research emphasizes the communication of information in this process either via political actors copying programs (Mooney & Lee, 1995; Seljan & Weller, 2011; Walker, 1969) or policy entrepreneurs learning from other states how

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