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Original article

## Bullying Victimization and Suicide Ideation and Behavior Among Adolescents in Europe: A 10-Country Study

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** To examine risk and protective factors moderating the associations between three types of bullying victimization (physical, verbal, and relational bullying) with suicide ideation/attempts in a large representative sample of European adolescents.

**Methods:** We analyzed cross-sectional data on 11,110 students (mean age = 14.9, standard deviation = .89) recruited from 168 schools in 10 European Union countries involved in the Saving and Empowering Young Lives in Europe study. A self-report questionnaire was used to measure

**IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION**

This study contributes new information about the associations between three types of bullying victimization and suicide

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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victimization types, depression, anxiety, parental and peer support, and suicide ideation and attempts. For each outcome, we applied hierarchical nonlinear models controlling for sociodemographics.

**Results:** Prevalence of victimization was 9.4% physical, 36.1% verbal, and 33.0% relational. Boys were more likely to be physically and verbally victimized, whereas girls were more prone to relational victimization. Physical victimization was associated with suicide ideation, and relational victimization was associated with suicide attempts. Other associations between victimization and suicidality (ideation/attempts) were identified through analysis of interactions with additional risk and protective factors. Specifically, verbal victimization was associated with suicide ideation among adolescents with depression who perceived low parental support. Similarly, low peer support increased the associations between verbal victimization and suicide ideation. Verbal victimization was associated with suicide attempts among adolescents with anxiety who perceived low parental support.

**Conclusions:** Findings support the development of prevention strategies for adolescent victims of bullying who may be at elevated risk for suicide ideation/behavior, by taking into account gender, the type of bullying, symptomatology, and availability of interpersonal support.

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ideation/behaviors in the presence of risk/protective factors in a large multinational sample. Findings underscore the importance of parental support in the context of peer victimization, and therefore point to involve parents in preventive interventions.

Bullying is defined as intentionally harmful aggressive behavior that is repetitive and involves an imbalance of power between perpetrator and affected person [1]. Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational, and cyber. Suicide is one of the three leading causes of death in young people worldwide [2]. Suicide ideation and attempts have potentially serious consequences, including substantial psychological effects, increased risk of repeated suicide attempt, and death [3].

The associations between bullying victimization and suicidality (ideation and attempts) have been well established in the past two decades [4,5]. Previous studies have examined risk and protective factors in the association between victimization and negative outcomes [6,7]. Some studies have examined it with suicidality as an outcome [8–10]. Depression was found to be a moderator in the association between bullying and suicidality [11–13]. A study by Espelage and Holt [10] among 661 middle school students examined school bullying and suicidality after controlling for depression and delinquency. Results indicated that after controlling for depression and delinquency differences in suicidal thoughts and behaviors emerged only between uninvolved youth and the victims and bully-victim groups, and these differences were minimal. However, only a few studies examined other types of psychopathology, such as anxiety [14,15]. Kim, Koh, and Leventhal [14], for example, have examined other risk factors but their study included depression and anxiety as control variables rather than as a mechanism moderating the association between bullying victimization and suicidality. In the present study, we examined both depression and anxiety as moderators.

Only a few studies have identified social protective factors against suicidal ideation or suicide attempts among victims of bullying. Parental monitoring [16], connectedness (i.e., feeling like you can talk to mom/dad about problems) [17], and peer support [17,18] were identified as potential protective factors that may diminish suicidality among victims of bullying. A study by Bonanno and Hymel [8] among 399 students in grades 8–10 found that social hopelessness partially mediated the association between victimization and suicidal ideation, suggesting that one potential mechanism by which victimized students become suicidal is through victimization's impact on social hopelessness.

Their findings also revealed that perceived social support buffered the association between victimization and suicidal ideation, such that victimized students with higher perceived social support from family reported lower levels of suicidal ideation than did students with lower perceived social support. However, other studies did not find significant influence of social support on victimization-suicide associations [19] or reported gender specific interactions [20]. The moderating role of gender has also produced mixed results and was found to be significant in some studies [13,20], while not in others [5,11].

Most research, to date, has focused on the overall experiences of bullying. A few previous studies have included specific types of victimization [10,16] but they have used varying measures to capture the types which makes the comparisons difficult [21]. To date, no study has examined the link between victimization and suicide in a multinational sample with the same frequency cut-offs. The study by Fleming and Jacobsen [22] examined the prevalence of bully victimization in middle school students in 19 low- and middle-income countries and explored the relationship between bullying, mental health, and health behaviors. Their results indicated that students who reported being bullied in the past month were more likely than nonbullied students to report feelings of sadness and hopelessness, loneliness, insomnia, and suicidal ideation. Their study, however, did not include suicidal behavior and did not have a unified frequency cutoff for participating countries. Given the ever-increasing multiethnic, multicultural composition of many countries, international research is essential to generate meaningful recommendations and guidelines regarding public health strategies for the prevention, intervention, and treatment of bullying-related risks [23].

The present study addresses prior research limitations by examining a three-way interaction with both risk and protective factors, which was not tested in previous studies, and by using unified variables in all countries, including suicidal behavior. The purpose of the present study in a large representative multinational sample of European adolescents was to (1) examine the associations between different types of victimization (i.e., physical, verbal, and relational) and suicidal ideation and attempts and (2) examine both risk (depression and anxiety) and protective factors (parental and peer support) and the interaction

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