



Research article

Young men's suicidal behavior, depression, crime, and substance use risks linked to childhood teasing



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ABSTRACT

The consequences in adulthood of bullying, teasing, and other peer victimization experiences in childhood rarely have been considered in prospective studies. Studies of peer victimization are mixed regarding whether negative outcomes are explained by pre-existing child vulnerabilities. Furthermore, replication of prior studies with broader definitions and other methods and demographic groups is needed. Based on mother, father, and teacher reports at ages 10–12 years, we classified American boys ($n = 206$) from higher delinquency neighborhoods as perpetrators of teasing, victims, perpetrator–victims, or uninvolved ($n = 26, 35, 29,$ and $116,$ respectively). Family income, parent and child depressive symptoms, and child antisocial behavior served as controls. Boys were assessed to age 34 years for suicide-attempt history (including death) and adult (ages 20–32 years) suicidal ideation, depressive symptoms, alcohol use, patterned tobacco and illicit drug use, and arrest. Relative to uninvolved boys, means or odds were higher for: suicide attempt among perpetrator–victims; all three groups for depressive symptoms and clinically significant symptoms; arrest for perpetrators and perpetrator–victims; number of arrests and violent arrest among perpetrator–victims; and patterned tobacco use among perpetrators and perpetrator–victims. With childhood vulnerabilities controlled, however, odds remained higher only for suicide attempt among perpetrator–victims, and criminal arrest and patterned tobacco use among perpetrators. Overall, childhood involvement in teasing predicted serious adverse outcomes in adulthood, in some cases beyond childhood risks. Programs that prevent peer victimization and identify already involved individuals for additional services may have positive impacts on the diverse public health problems of suicide, crime, depression, and tobacco use.

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Bullying is a proactive form of aggression repeated over time by perpetrators with greater social power than their victims (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Olweus, 1993). Approximately 10–20% of school-age children have been bullied, and 5–15% have bullied others (Due et al., 2005). Both roles present serious risks to children's immediate and longterm psychosocial adjustment and physical health (e.g., Brunstein Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Barman, 1999; Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Kumpulainen et al., 2001), and bully–victims (who bully others and are victimized) are at highest risk (e.g., Gini, 2008; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Clear definitions of bullying have been valuable. Yet, a sole focus on childhood bullying may lead researchers and preventionists to neglect the broader class of deleterious peer experiences (Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012). For example, teasing may be experienced frequently and

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for long periods, but may not be classified as bullying if it is not perpetrated often enough by a given individual. Thus, in the present study, we draw upon the bullying literature but consider broader groups of children who tease others (*perpetrators*), are teased (*victims*), or both (*perpetrator–victims*).

Cross-sectional and some longitudinal studies have linked peer victimization with serious problems (e.g., Ttofi, Farrington, Losel, & Loeber 2011; van Geel, Vedder, & Taniol, 2014). Yet, there are few prospective studies of the negative impacts of childhood bullying on psychosocial outcomes in adulthood. In the present study, we base our review on prior theoretical and empirical work on childhood bullying in relation to adult psychopathology, suicide risk, substance use, and crime outcomes, and we extend the focus to teasing.

1. Theory linking peer teasing with longterm outcomes

Being teased or bullied in childhood may set the stage for later emotional disorders and suicide risk by contributing to low social status and eroding self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and connectedness with others (e.g., Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Victimization may be a significant source of stress that interacts with genetic vulnerability for mood disorder (e.g., Gottfredson, Foshee, Ennett, Haberstick, & Smolen, 2015) or alters stress reactivity (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2011). Bullies also are at risk, as they may be socially marginalized and show higher rates of conduct problems, callous-unemotional traits, and depression (e.g., Fanti & Kimonis, 2012; Frick et al., 2003) others are popular, so-called socially integrated bullies (Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Farmer et al., 2010). Yet, relying on manipulation, coercion, and aggression may lead bullies to develop weaker or more hostile relationships with others that increases eventual risk for depression, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempt (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015). Indeed, evidence from longterm prospective studies and the conceptualization of bullying others as a stressor (Swearer & Hymel, 2015) suggests bullies' longterm risk for depression and suicide warrants further consideration. Consistent with these theories, perpetrator–victims may be at especially high risk.

Substance use may be another manifestation of psychosocial problems. Effects of being a childhood perpetrator or victim on later substance use may be indirect via other maladjustment—for example, using substances to relieve aversive emotional states—or through increased affiliation with other deviant or marginalized individuals prone to substance use (Vieno, Gini, & Santinello, 2011). Other explanations for the association between being a peer victim and substance use may relate to youth's desire to gain social status, be more accepted by peers, and, ultimately, avoid victimization (Ioannou, 2003; Moreno et al., 2009; Vieno et al., 2011). Again, perpetrator–victims may be most vulnerable.

Finally, regarding crime, bullies and perpetrators of peer teasing may be at special risk. If they learn to rely on psychological aggression or coercion to get their way with peers, these tactics may be reinforced and generalized to new circumstances, and may lead youth to affiliate with increasingly deviant peer groups that support criminal behavior (*homophily*; e.g., Hartup, 1996). The link between being teased by peers and later crime risk is less clear. Being victimized may cause youth to become disenfranchised from school and mainstream society, which may increase risk for crime. Alternatively, victims may be less likely to commit crime, particularly violent crime, if their experiences with being overpowered in childhood generalize to passive, fearful, or prosocial behavioral tendencies in adulthood (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Given the uncertainty and general dearth of longterm prospective studies of bully–victims, further research on adult crime outcomes for victims of teasing and perpetrator–victims is needed.

2. Commonalities and limitations of longterm prospective studies

Before we summarize the findings from longterm prospective studies of childhood bullying and victimization, we note some critical methodological and theoretical issues that influenced our approach. First, studies should account for the well-established co-occurrence of victimizing others and being victimized by identifying youth in both roles (e.g., bully–victims in Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013). Failing to do so obscures whether the risks conferred by one experience are misattributed to the other. Second, given that childhood and family risks predict perpetration, victimization, and myriad negative adult outcomes, here we review studies that adjusted for vulnerability factors. Third, most studies have assessed bullying and being victimized by self-report (exclusively, or in combination with other informants). This is well justified, given that peer victimization may not always be witnessed by adults. However, other informants' reports may be valuable. If parents and teachers can identify peer behaviors that confer serious longterm risks to children, then these adults are well positioned to directly assist with screening and prevention; if not, then such programs must completely rely on what children report. Using multiple informants also is responsive to recent research documenting that bully and victim roles differ across time and contexts (Ryoo, Wang, & Swearer, 2015). Other informants' reports also may have unique value because perpetrator and victim roles are stigmatized and could be minimized on self-reports (e.g., rationalizing aggression; misperceiving others' intent). Additionally, if studies use self-reports to measure both involvement in teasing and problem outcomes, associations may be inflated by shared method variance.

Fourth, longterm prospective studies have differed in terms of the developmental specificity of bullying involvement. For example, Klomek et al. (2009) focused on bullying at age 8 years, which is age specific, but risks that children who bullied at ages 9 or 10 are misclassified. In contrast, Copeland and Colleagues' (2013) primary findings were based on these behaviors across ages, for example, 9–16 years (less age specific, but low misclassification risk), with follow-up analyses at ages 9–13 and 14–16 years. Finally, prospective studies have varied in terms of the temporal separations between predictors and outcomes. For example, Gibb, Horwood, and Fergusson (2011) used a developmentally specific approach, but since

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