



Do juveniles bully more than young offenders?

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This study compares bullying behaviour among juvenile and young offenders and incorporates two different methods to measure bullying. Ninety-five male juvenile and 196 male young offenders completed two questionnaires, one that measured bullying directly and one that measured behaviours *indicative* of “being bullied” or of “bullying others”. Juveniles perceived a higher extent of bullying than young offenders. Juveniles reported significantly more physical, psychological or verbal and overall direct forms of bullying behaviour than young offenders. A number of differences were found between juveniles and young offenders with regard to the types of prisoners likely to become victims, who they would advise a victim to speak to and how bullying could be prevented. The results are discussed in relation to developmental theories of aggression and how bullying behaviour can be defined and measured among prisoners.

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Introduction

The extent of bullying among prisoners has been recognized as an area of concern (Power *et al.*, 1997), with some researchers describing it as an “endemic problem” (Dyson *et al.*, 1997). In a review of studies, Ireland *et al.* (1999) reported estimates of the proportion of prisoners reporting to bully others ranging from 20 to 70 per cent for young offenders and 0 to 62 per cent for adult offenders. Estimates of the proportion of prisoners reporting to being a victim ranged from 30 to 75 per cent for young offenders and 8 to 57 per cent for adults. There is evidence that particular “types” of prisoners are at an increased risk of being targeted by bullies. These include prisoners who do not repay their debts, the weak and vulnerable, those who do not conform to the norms of the prisoner subculture, those new to the prison system, sex-offenders, those who cannot defend themselves, those with a limited social network, prisoners serving short sentences (Brookes, 1993), introverts, younger inmates, those considered of low intelligence and drug users (Ireland and Archer, 1996). Those prisoners most likely to become victims tend to be those who have violated the norms of the prisoner code in some way. Primarily, this relates to prisoners who inform or “grass” on others, with being seen as a “grass” often cited as justification for bullying by other prisoners (Connell and Farrington, 1996). Although there has been a marked increase in prison-based research into bullying over recent years, the scope of this research remains limited in terms of the different populations that it has addressed. To date the majority of this research has focused on male young and adult offenders with no studies addressing juvenile offenders as a distinct population.

The definitions of bullying used by researchers have varied. Some prison-based researchers have used definitions previously applied in a school environment (e.g. Beck, 1992). Such definitions use the term “bullying” and tend to describe it as a specific form of aggression that includes physical, psychological or verbal attack, involves an imbalance of power, is repeated and intended to cause harm or fear to the victim (Farrington, 1993). More recently, prison-based researchers have argued that a broader definition of bullying needs to

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be applied to a prison environment (Beck and Ireland, 1997), one that takes into account the specific characteristics of this environment. These broader, prison-based definitions argue that aggression does not have to be repeated in order to be classed as bullying and can relate to behaviours occurring on a single occasion. An example of a prison-based definition of bullying behaviour is as follows: *An individual is being bullied when they are the victim of direct and/or indirect aggression happening on a weekly basis, by the same or different perpetrator(s). Single incidences of aggression can be viewed as bullying, particularly when they are severe and when the individual either believes or fears that they are at risk of future victimisation by the same perpetrator or others* (Ireland, in press).

Researchers employing such definitions tend to avoid use of the term “bullying” and instead provide participants with discrete behaviours that bullying is believed to include (Ireland, 1999). They argue that research using the term “bullying” may be under-estimating the extent to which bullying takes place (Ireland, 2000), particularly since the term is considered both an emotive and a childish one that older adolescents and adults may be reluctant to report. Researchers that avoid use of the term argue that they are not measuring bullying *per se* (as they would if they applied a more strict school-based definition), but instead that they are addressing behaviours *indicative* of “bullying others” or of “being bullied”. It is recognized, however, that omitting the term “bullying” may also lead to an overestimation of the problem since the definition is left to the researcher and not the respondent.

It is also worth noting that the prison-based definition provided takes into account both *direct* and *indirect* forms of aggression. Direct aggression relates to instances where the aggressor interacts directly with the victim by employing physical, theft-related or verbal attack, etc. Indirect forms of aggression are more subtle and include behaviours such as gossiping, ostracising and spreading rumours, where the aggressor and/or their intent is hidden (Ireland, 2001). Indirect forms of aggression have not always featured in definitions of bullying (Ireland, 2000), even though it has been found to occur among prisoners to the same extent if not more so than direct bullying (Ireland, 1999).

In addition to the different definitions applied to prison-based studies, a variety of methods have also been used to collect data. These have included interviews, self-report questionnaires and official records (Ireland *et al.*, 1999). Differences in the definitions and methods applied makes any direct comparison between studies difficult. Thus, although researchers can say that bullying does exist in prisons and is a significant cause of concern to prison governors and the establishment as a whole, the *true* extent of this problem is less easy to gauge. Hence, the use of phrases such as “endemic” to describe the “problem” of bullying in prisons (e.g. Dyson *et al.*, 1997) may not be justified.

As mentioned previously, the types of bullying reported by prisoners can include both direct and/or indirect forms of aggression. The type of aggressive strategy employed is largely dependent on developmental change with direct aggression (the most observable type) arguably *decreasing* over an individual's lifespan whereas indirect and subtle aggressive strategies tend to *increase*. For example, Walker *et al.* (2000) addressed aggression among older adults and found that indirect aggression was reported significantly more than direct aggression, with the majority of respondents (79 per cent) reporting that they never used direct aggression. These findings can be related to the developmental theory of aggression of Björkqvist *et al.* (1992a) in which aggressive behaviour is seen as falling along a continuum of development, appearing in the order of direct physical, direct verbal and indirect. Although Björkqvist *et al.* (1992a) conceive these three aggressive strategies to be distinct from one another they prefer to view them as “. . .three developmental phases, partly following, partly

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