



How Social Benefits for the Less Privileged Can Reduce Racial Differences in Bullying among Youth

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Bullying – the repeated exposure to negative actions by one or more individuals over an extended period of time – has received increasing attention over recent years. Research shows that nearly 28% of sixth to twelfth grade students in the United States have experienced bullying, and approximately 30% of young people admit to engaging in one or more forms of this behavior.

For both bullies and victims, bullying along with other kinds of maltreatment can leave social and biological scars well beyond childhood. Maltreatment during early stages of the life-course can have lasting emotional effects that lead to substance abuse disorders during adulthood, because maltreated and bullied children often suffer from mental health disorders, anxiety, and depression. Victims of bullying are also at an increased risk of gun violence, severe assaults, crime, incarceration, and thoughts of suicide.

Addressing the Problem

Recently a number of anti-bullying organizations and advocates have announced plans to address different forms of bullying. For example, during the London 2016 Founders Forum this past June, Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, implored technology companies to address issues of cyberbullying among children. In doing so, he established a taskforce “to develop a new, positive strategy to combat bullying.” How effective will this approach prove to be? Although technological checks on cyberbullying may reduce exposure to negative barrages online, the offline lives and personalities of bullying victims may not improve. What is more, this is a narrow approach to the issues, because bullying among school peers may be a response to the broader interpersonal and structural conditions that youth experience. Conditions of poverty and inequality may encourage bullying as one factor among many that place children at risk for adverse outcomes as adults. A broader approach to bullying might start by recognizing that social policies aimed at lessening economic hardship affect the prevalence of this behavior.

New Research on Social Conditions that Promote Bullying

My colleagues and I investigated how neighborhood disadvantage, cumulative disadvantage, and enlistment in a variety of needs-based social programs operated to accentuate or to alleviate the risk of bullying among American adolescents after the Great Recession of 2009-10. By extending Elijah Anderson’s concept of a “code of the street” to schools, we probe whether hyper-masculine behaviors that facilitate violence in economically distressed areas encourage classroom bullying too. In addition, we test whether social programs that mollify poverty and inequality attenuate the risk of bullying, thereby neutralizing classroom codes that are framed around economic resources and material goods.

Our research supports a number of conclusions, starting with the conclusion that bullies are severely disadvantaged. Not only are bullies more likely to reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods – residential locations that contain a number of disorders and reduced levels of social cohesion – but bullies are also exposed to higher levels of cumulative disadvantage – domestic violence, parental incarceration, and frayed parent-child relationships.

Economic deprivation hurts children and facilitates educational inequality. Adolescents are significantly more likely to have a parent contacted by school officials about any problems if they live in homes under constant threat of deprivation but are not enrolled in any social programs. Furthermore, these youth are more likely to repeat a grade if they reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods or experience cumulative disadvantage.

Overall, the families of bullies are enrolled in more needs-based social programs than families of non-bullies. This makes sense because adolescents are significantly more likely to bully if they come from families where parents often find it hard to cover the basics like food or housing. Nevertheless, adolescents from similarly needy families are more likely to engage in bullying if their families are NOT enrolled in social assistance programs that offer health insurance, temporary welfare assistance, and food subsidies via school lunches, Food Stamps, or supplemental nutrition for women and infants.

A key finding is that social programs that ameliorate economic hardship have the capacity to upend racial differences in bullying. Overall, Hispanics and non-Hispanic Blacks are significantly more likely to bully than non-Hispanic whites, and this finding is particularly salient among adolescents who experience neighborhood and cumulative disadvantage, even after accounting for biases and mechanisms that select youth into disadvantaged communities and families. Yet, when we compared rates of bullying by race among adolescents who were identical in their likelihoods of familial participation in social programs, we found that both Black-white and Hispanic-white differences in bullying disappeared. This is an important finding because racial differences in bullying may reflect the stresses and strains of social disadvantage experienced by adolescents. Should codes of the street be adopted within classrooms, as a result of neighborhood and cumulative disadvantage, the consequences of such externalizing behaviors like bullying may impede the development and accumulation of human capital at the very moments when adolescents are transitioning to adulthood.

Moving beyond Cyber-Solutions

Ultimately, our research shows that government programs that reduce poverty and inequality have the potential to moderate racial differences in bullying – and might offer further remedies as well. Our findings are consistent with other research, such as that showing the potential of government programs to help children with incarcerated parents.

Clearly social benefits can ameliorate many ills, including bullying. However, the uneven economic recovery and cutbacks in social programs may converge to place more youth at risk of greater material hardships – and therefore spark more bullying. As policymakers and technology experts devise methods to prevent cyberbullying, they should realize that adequate social programs to ameliorate poverty and inequality might do even more to counter this scourge.

Read more in Bryan L. Sykes, Alex R. Piquero, and Jason P. Gioviano, “Code of the Classroom? Social Disadvantage and Bullying Among American Adolescents, U.S. 2011-2012.” *Crime & Delinquency* (online first, April 2016).