

Behind Bars

BULLYING AMONG INCARCERATED ADOLESCENTS

Bullying is recognized to be a serious and persistent concern facing youth. A Youth Health Survey conducted by the McCreary Centre Society in BC's nine youth custody centres indicated that bullying is common within young offender facilities and is associated with a variety of problems and health concerns.

Youth were asked a number of questions about their experiences with bullying. Bullying was defined as involving "physically harming or verbally harassing someone for something (e.g. money, food, cigarettes, etc.) or to make them do something against their will."

Prevalence of Bullying

Overall, 69% of incarcerated adolescents surveyed reported bullying others while in custody, and 45% of adolescents reported being victimized while in custody. About a third of adolescents reported that they both bullied others and were victimized. Relatively few adolescents indicated that they were not involved in bullying (23%).

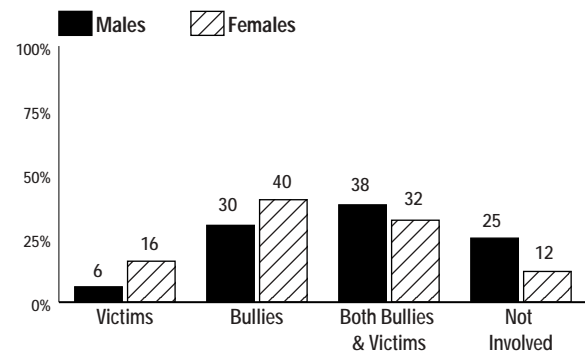
Types of Bullying

A variety of bullying and victimization experiences were reported. Adolescents commonly reported perpetrating verbal aggression towards others. Sixty-six percent of males and 77% of females reported bullying others with mean and unpleasant words. Physical aggression was also common. Forty-seven percent of males and 33% of females reported bullying others by punching, hitting, or beating up.

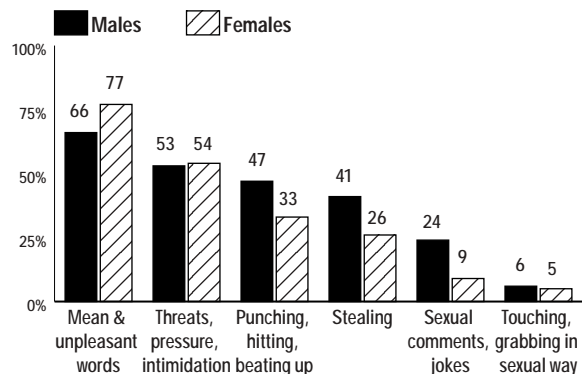
Data in this Fact Sheet were collected in 2000 through a 125-item questionnaire administered to 243 youth who were detained in BC's nine youth custody centers. Complete results are available in the report, *Time Out: A Profile of BC Youth in Custody* (2001). Burnaby, British Columbia: The McCreary Centre Society.

The survey of youth in custody was conducted by the McCreary Centre Society, a non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, information and community-based participation projects.

Bullying Among Incarcerated Adolescents



While in Custody, Bullied Others By...



Rates of sexual victimization were high, particularly among females. More females than males reported that they had been bullied by being touched or grabbed in a sexual way (22% vs. 5%), and by unwanted sexual comments or jokes (26% vs. 14%).

Abuse

Youth involved in bullying within the custody centre, either as a bully or victim, were more likely than those not involved in bullying to report a history of abuse. In comparison to adolescents not involved in bullying, victims were more likely to have experienced previous sexual abuse (35% vs. 11%), and witnessed family violence (80% vs. 44%).

Also, in comparison to adolescents not involved in bullying, adolescents who were both bullies and victims were more likely to have experienced previous physical abuse (88% vs. 56%) and sexual abuse (30% vs. 11%). In addition, they were more likely to have witnessed family violence.

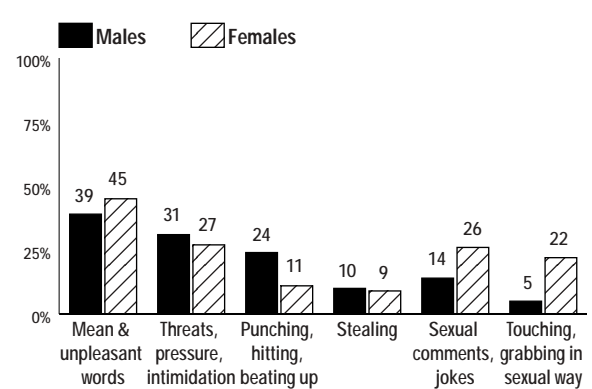
Bullying in the Community

In comparison to those not involved in bullying, youth involved in bullying while in the custody centre were more likely to be affiliated with a gang (47% vs. 23%) and to have bullied peers in the community (92% vs. 46%). Importantly, aggression appeared common even among youth who were victims of bullying in the custody centre. Seventy percent of victims reported that they had bullied peers in the community.

Family Connectedness

The Youth Health Survey examined adolescents' connectedness or attachments to others. Research in schools has shown that bullies tend to have distant relationships with their families whereas victims are sometimes described as overly attached. In this survey, we did not find a relationship between bullying and family connectedness. This may be because families have less contact with and may play a smaller role in the everyday life of incarcerated adolescents, or it may reflect the fact that the majority of these youth in custody come from troubled homes.

While in Custody, Was Bullied By...



Abuse and Bullying

	BULLYING BEHAVIOURS WHILE IN CUSTODY			
	Victim	Bully	Bully and Victim	Not Involved
Ever physically abused	75%	71%	88%	56%
Ever sexually abused	35%	21%	30%	11%
Witnessed family violence	80%	58%	72%	44%

Outside of Custody Centre, Gang Involvement and Experiences of Bullying

	BULLYING BEHAVIOURS WHILE IN CUSTODY			
	Victim	Bully	Bully and Victim	Not Involved
Belonged to a gang	25%	47%	34%	23%
Was bullied in community	35%	14%	43%	11%
Bullied others in community	70%	92%	78%	46%

Psychological Adjustment

Victims and adolescents who were both bullies and victims reported higher levels of psychological distress than other adolescents. Self-harm and suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts were common among victims and individuals who were both bullies and victims.

Fifty-five percent of victims (vs. 9% of bullies) reported that they had purposely harmed themselves while they were in the community. Twenty-one percent of individuals who were both bullies and victims (vs. 7% of bullies) reported that they had attempted suicide while in custody.

Drug Use

The survey asked youth about their use of substances before entering the custody centre. Drug and alcohol use had been high among all these adolescents, however, adolescents who were both bullies and victims were more likely than adolescents not involved in bullying to frequently use marijuana (84% vs. 62%), cocaine (54% vs. 28%), and injected drugs (16% vs. 4%).

Conclusions

The relationship between peer victimization and psychosocial adjustment emphasizes that victims and individuals who are both bullies and victims are vulnerable and may benefit from mental health services. Also, given the prevalence and potential serious consequences of bullying, the development of anti-bullying policies may be an important step in recognizing and reducing bullying. In the United Kingdom, all prisons are now required to develop an anti-bullying strategy. To date, it appears that no similar policy requirements have been established in Canada.

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This Fact Sheet provides information about bullying and victimization among young people in BC's youth custody centers. It is based on a journal article: Viljoen, J. L., O'Neill, M., & Sidhu, A. (in press). Bullying behaviours in male and female young offenders: Prevalence, types, and association with psychosocial adjustment. Aggressive Behaviour.

Suicide, Self-Harm, and Bullying

	BULLYING BEHAVIOURS WHILE IN CUSTODY			
	Victim	Bully	Bully and Victim	Not Involved
Considered suicide in past year	55%	13%	37%	26%
Planned suicide in past year	45%	7%	30%	15%
Attempted suicide in past year	45%	9%	31%	17%
Attempted suicide while in custody	15%	7%	21%	6%
Engaged in self-harming behaviour in the community	55%	9%	29%	21%

Substance Use Outside of Custody Centre and Bullying

	BULLYING BEHAVIOURS WHILE IN CUSTODY			
	Victim	Bully	Bully and Victim	Not Involved
Frequent marijuana use	70%	72%	84%	62%
Frequent alcohol use	39%	49%	53%	39%
Frequent lifetime cocaine use	47%	50%	54%	28%
Frequent lifetime heroin use	53%	42%	46%	26%
Frequent lifetime drug injection	11%	5%	16%	4%



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