

BULLYING PAYS! A SURVEY OF YOUNG OFFENDERS

Michele Elliott

- Unchecked school bullying can lead to youth crime
- Young offenders tell their stories
- 92% of young offenders in this study engaged in bullying behaviour while at school

INTRODUCTION

Kidscape, the children's safety charity, carried out a survey of young offenders in March and April 1994. The results indicate that unchecked school bullying tends to promote a climate of violence and aggression which can encourage crime.

Kidscape questioned 79 young offenders in two institutions, HMYOI Onley (Rugby) and HMYOI Glen Parva (Leicester), about their experiences of school bullying. Young offenders were asked whether bullying happened often in their school, whether they were involved in bullying, whether they thought unchecked school bullying led to a decrease in respect for authority, and what they thought schools should do to tackle bullying effectively.

100% of the 79 young offenders we surveyed had been involved in bullying in some way. The majority (85%) were themselves bullies or were involved as gang members or bystanders, either encouraging the bullying or joining in from the sidelines.

15% of the young offenders started out as victims of bullying - but some of these victims went on to become bullies themselves (07%). Some of these victims (05%) committed offences to emulate the bullies.

Kidscape found that 92% of the young offenders had engaged in bullying behaviour and went on to commit offences. 05% committed crimes under the influence of bullies. 03% of the total group of young offenders were and remain victims of bullying. It would seem from the survey that there is a direct correlation between unchecked bullying behaviour and juvenile crime.

98% of the young offenders thought that unchecked bullying did make pupils less respectful of authority and 95% of those who admitted to being bullies at school said that getting away with bullying for so long had made them more likely to commit offences.

Only 3 inmates out of the total surveyed said that bullying happened rarely in their schools. All the other inmates indicated that bullying was a frequent and inescapable fact of school life. One inmate said that the "pecking order in schools prepared you for real life".

All the young offenders wanted bullying stopped in schools. The majority thought that the bully's parents should be involved and that more counselling should be available for bullies. Several favoured excluding persistent bullies together.

All those questioned, even victims of bullying, were against reporting bullying incidents to staff or naming particular bullies. 'Grassing' was seen as a far more heinous offence than even the most violent of bullying attacks.

THE SURVEY

79 young offenders aged from 16 to 21 responded to Kidscape's initial Questionnaire. The majority of respondents had attended schools in or near Rugby and Leicester. For ease of analysis and reference, Kidscape categorised respondents according to their answers as

either 'bullies', 'victims' or 'witnesses' (i.e. those who had encouraged the bullying or joined in from the sidelines).

Respondents were also asked if they would be prepared to participate in an interview relating to the Questionnaire. Those who did not wish to be interviewed remained anonymous. Kidscape then interviewed 33 respondents. In these interviews inmates were asked to expand on some of their answers to the Questionnaire and were encouraged to describe their involvement in school bullying.

BULLYING: WHO IS INVOLVED?

The majority of the young offenders (62%) had themselves been bullies at school. 23% were involved as bystanders or witnesses and 15% had been the victims of bullying.

When Kidscape asked those who had admitted bullying others at school why they had become bullies, the answers were similar: "to be number one in my year"; "it made me feel big in front of my friends"; "I did it to show off"; "I wanted to show the girls who was best". These were typical responses. One inmate said that he was a "nobody" at home but that at school he was "top dog and it was great".

Generally the bullies belonged to a gang. Only 6 inmates said they had bullied on their own and one of these was unusual in that he fought other bullies when their victims asked him for help. Two of the bullies said they had joined their gang because if they hadn't they would have become gang victims. However, the majority of bullies were either gang leaders or had joined a gang because their friends belonged. "I wanted to be with my mates" was a frequent reason. Gangs often had a 'hard image' and belonging conferred high group status on members. "It was really cool to belong to this tough gang".

Most of the victims said that they felt they had been bullied because of their small size or because they were quiet. The bullies admitted that they targeted weaknesses and what they perceived as differences. One victim said he had been picked on because of rumours that he was gay.

Only 8 of the bullies had begun bullying in primary school; the rest had started bullying at 12 or 13. Most of the victims had only been bullied in secondary school, although a few had been bullied for the whole of their school careers. Witnesses confirmed that, although bullying only happened occasionally in their primary schools, it was very common in their secondary schools.

WHAT SORT OF BULLYING?

The bullying ranged from name-calling and persistent taunting through theft, kicking, punching and beating to assault with weapons. Threats were usually backed up by violence. Obtaining money or possessions like Walkmans or getting homework done were often motives for bullying. Weapons involved in bullying incidents included a decorating tack gun modified to fire darts and wooden clubs.

Violent and aggressive bullying was the rule. The bullies were very matter-of-fact about using violence to get what they wanted. One bully talked about giving a victim "a couple of whacks" and another said, "If they didn't pay up, I'd give them a good hiding and threaten to kill them next time." Not surprisingly, he found this worked. The bullies had no compunction about using violence. For them it was merely an effective way of getting what they wanted. In fact one bully told us that he never thought of the intimidation practised by his gang as bullying; for him it was nothing more than "a bit of a laugh"

CLIMATE OF VIOLENCE

As the interviews progressed it became apparent that the violent bullying which seems to have been endemic in the majority of schools the young offenders had attended reflected the violence present in their lives outside school. Many said that fighting often took place around the estates and streets where they lived and these fights often involved different gangs. Two of the bullies were very specific about their involvement in these gang fights. One said he was always surprised when he saw other pupils giving in completed homework. He said he never had time for homework as he was out all evening fighting with rival street gangs.

When Kidscape asked one inmate why he had become a bully, he answered succinctly "Rough school, bad area." He did not think he'd had a choice; as far as he was concerned, bullying and violence were an integral part of life inside and outside school. A victim said that when he'd told his mother he was being bullied, she had clouted him and told him that life was tough and he'd better learn to fight back if he was going to get on. Another victim said he had seen both his brothers beaten by his father when they had said they were being bullied so he hadn't dared tell when he was also bullied. His father expected all his sons to fight their way out of trouble. Another inmate told Kidscape that he had had to rescue his younger brother on several occasions from bullies and that he despised him because he couldn't stand up for himself.

It seems that the only way to win approval in a culture like this where violence is the norm is by being more violent than others. This is a fact recognized by all those Kidscape questioned. You could only be 'number one' if you were prepared to fight and use violence. Small, quiet, or studious boys were held in contempt and a tough, 'hard' image was the ultimate goal. The endemic bullying these young offenders described in their schools reflects these beliefs. One inmate said, "Violence is what bullies understand". In fact, everyone at these schools understood violence: it was the touchstone of their lives.

A number of inmates commented that, if victims had had the requisite physical strength, they would have been bullies. "Everybody wants to be top", and it was accepted that the only way to be "top" was to fight your way there. At the same time, a few witnesses recognized the hollowness of the successful bully's position. "Bullies don't have friends", one said. Nevertheless, being part of the top gang was important to many. One inmate said that he hadn't particularly enjoyed the bullying but he had gone along with the gang as they were his "mates". Belonging to the gang was essential for him.

ADULT RESPONSES TO SCHOOL BULLYING

Two thirds of the victims said that they had never told anyone about the bullying. They gave several reasons for their silence: "I was too scared to tell"; "If you tell, it will come back on you"; "I just tried to keep my head down"; "I was afraid it would get worse if I told". The most common reason cited by the victims and witnesses for not telling anyone about the bullying was "I'm not a grass". Some of the witnesses explained that the bullies were their friends and they didn't 'grass' on mates.

This survey revealed very clearly that the taboo against 'grassing', 'sneaking' or 'ratting' is very strong. Victims would rather suffer continued bullying than face the opprobrium of being branded a 'grass'. It is apparent that if schools are to take effective action against bullying the taboo against 'grassing' has to be broken. This means that the victims and bystanders who tell about bullying have to be protected from revenge attacks by bullies. The names of those who do pluck up the courage to tell should be kept secret so that the bully never learns who has reported him. Effective anti-bullying policies encourage pupils

to report all incidents of bullying and the onus is on the adults to ensure that those who tell about bullying are safe.

Only a third of the victims said that they had ever told anyone about the bullying. Only one victim said that the adult he told had stopped the bullying. In all other cases, telling did not lead to effective action against the bullies. The actions taken by school staff usually consisted of no more than a general injunction not to do it again, although some imposed detentions. None of the bullies thought that this sort of punishment was effective. One bully said that he'd quite enjoyed detentions as they gave him "a bit of peace".

As a final resort, some schools excluded the bully but the exclusion was rarely permanent and, on the bully's return, the problems started up again. One bully said that he'd been excluded and sent to a special boarding school but that, on returning to his old school, no one, not even the staff, believed he could have changed and he said they all "expected" him to go back to bullying. Another bully said that once he'd started bullying, everyone labelled him as a bully and that's how he was treated. One bully who took dinner money from other pupils said that even after he stopped threatening people or intimidating them, they'd still come and give him their money. By then his reputation as a bully was enough to frighten other students. It seems that after a while bullies get trapped in their role by other people's expectations and it is hard for them to change their behaviour without considerable support.

WHAT RESPONDENTS WOULD DO ABOUT SCHOOL BULLYING

All the bullies said that punishment didn't work and wasn't the answer to bullying. Perhaps this was only to be expected! However, 52% of witnesses thought that punishment should be used. Witnesses also favoured excluding the bully. One bully said that he hated being excluded as he "enjoyed school". Some suggested that bullies should be sent to special schools where they would get a taste of their own medicine and one victim thought that "quiet" pupils should be separated into different classes from "noisy or rough" pupils.

The bullies all said that they thought counselling would have helped. One bully said he stopped bullying when he was 15 because a teacher he respected had taken the trouble to talk to him about his problems. Most of the young offenders thought that involving the bully's parents was important. One bully told us his mum had known about the bullying but she was "soft" and hadn't wanted to tell his father. This bully said that if his dad had known what was going on he would have given him "a right kicking". Inmates thought that parents could punish bullies more effectively than school staff because they could stop privileges and 'ground' bullies. All the victims said that if they had children they wouldn't want them to suffer as they had done. They said they would certainly try to stop the bullying if their children told them they were victims.

There were two cases where schools had stopped bullying by threatening the bully with police action if he persisted.

Many of the bullies said that they hadn't realised the effect of bullying on a victim until they themselves were bullied in prison. One bully said that he had known that his victims suffered but he had "blanked it out".

In cases where victims had tried to stand up to the bullies they were usually forced into a fight. One bully said that if people stood up to him they had to be prepared to back it up with force. He said he respected them for taking a stand. One victim eventually turned on his tormentors and knifed one of the bullies. The gang 'avenged' this by beating the victim so badly he had to be hospitalised. In another case a victim waited until he grew bigger

than those who had bullied him and then began to bully them in his turn. He said he then got into trouble for fighting.

DOES UNCHECKED SCHOOL BULLYING LEAD TO CRIME?

As effective action to check the bullying was not taken by school staff, it flourished and bullies concluded that bullying pays. In their experience, using intimidation, violence and blackmail to get what you wanted were successful strategies. They were told at school that bullying was wrong but, as nothing was ever done to stop their bullying behaviour, they had never had to face the consequences of their actions. As far as they were concerned, bullying paid off and they were good at it.

Given this background, the progression from school bullying to crime was apparently inevitable. As one witness said, "If they think they can get away with it, 'course they'll go nicking things". Bullies who were never brought to task for their behaviour in school thought that they would continue to get away with theft, intimidation and violence outside school. They had got used to their power over weaker individuals and expected such "easy pickings" would continue. They had not learned that they were accountable for their actions and they did not expect retribution.

The inmates Kidscape questioned had usually been convicted of stealing cars (taking a vehicle without owner's consent or 'twocking') or burglary. It appeared that twocking was generally the first criminal act committed by most of the inmates and some then 'progressed' to burglary. Some also had convictions for GBH. One bully told about a raid on a shop he and a friend had committed. Kidscape asked if they had used weapons. "Not really," he replied, "I just had a baseball bat and my mate had an iron bar." He seem surprised that anyone could take exception to this - after all, they hadn't used knives or guns and they had been using bats and bars for years at school. Another bully had sprayed CS gas at a security guard. He said the guard "was this great big bloke. I thought he'd laugh if I punched him".

A couple of inmates said that they had been bullied into twocking - they were told that they would be beaten up if they did not go along with the gang. One victim said he had started to take drugs to boost his confidence and then had become a thief to pay for the habit. Some commented on the fact that the bullies had built up a 'hard image' for themselves and that, once they had all left school, they could no longer intimidate their peers so easily. Crime was one way of maintaining their 'hard image'.

Kidscape asked all the young offenders whether they knew what had happened to the bullies in their schools. In every case where the inmate knew what had happened to the bullies once they had left school they said that the bullies were now in prison for a variety of offences. A few inmates told us that some of the bullies they knew had committed offences but hadn't been caught. In one case where the inmate had been one of a gang of eight bullies, he told us that the whole gang was now in prison and his own three and a half year sentence was the shortest any of them had received.

Several of those Kidscape interviewed understood that what they had done had damaged their chances of finding jobs and making successful lives for themselves. A victim who had been convicted of twocking said he had done it to be "like them" (i.e. the bullies) but he hadn't expected to end up in prison. Some of the bullies Kidscape interviewed said that they regretted the fact that they had wasted their school days and had left without qualifications. One bully of 20, who was serving his second sentence, said he had a wife and a baby and he wished he could get a job and settle down but no one wanted him with his record. Another said, "It was stupid what I did - fighting and twocking, all that. I don't know what will happen when I get out or what I'll do".

SUMMARY

The results of this survey indicate that unchecked school bullying encourages bullies to believe that bullying gets them what they want and that, no matter how aggressive their behaviour, they can get away with it.

Although this Kidscape survey was qualitative rather than quantitative, its findings are supported by other researchers. Professor Dan Olweus in his 30-year follow-up studies in Norway found that approximately 60 percent of boys who were characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 (11 to 14 year olds) had at least one conviction by the age of 24. As many as 35-40 percent of these former bullies had three or more convictions by this age, compared to only 10 percent of the control group who had not been involved in bullying in grades 6-9 (Olweus, D. 1993 *Bullying at School: What we know and what we can do*, Blackwell).

If we ignore bullying in schools or if we tackle it half-heartedly, we are storing up trouble for the future. Bullies must learn as soon as they begin to bully others that such behaviour will not be tolerated and that sanctions will be imposed if they persist. The sooner bullies learn that their actions have consequences the better it will be for them, for their victims and for society.

Many of the young offenders who took part in the Kidscape survey were intelligent and articulate. They were honest about their experiences and several of them had given considerable thought to the problem of bullying. However, they were all learning in prison a lesson they should have learned at school: society will not tolerate violent and criminal behaviour and will punish those who break its laws.