Bullying behaviours: the relationship with offending, violence and exclusion

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A recent survey of more than 2,000 children found that being bullied was the top barrier to having a good childhood. Other researchers have concluded that the short and long-term effects of bullying are comparable with many childhood adversities, and that facing adversity and disadvantage also leaves children vulnerable to bullying, compounding and adding to distress. Childhood bullying therefore has implications for all professionals working with children, as well as for wider society, but may have specific relevance to youth justice. This Info Sheet highlights findings from a study of bullying behaviours among young people at high risk of harm to themselves or others. Read the full report here.

Definitions of bullying
Bullying involves a repeated pattern of behaviour that causes harm or distress, where there is an actual or perceived power imbalance between the people involved. While the terms bully, victim and bully-victim are used for clarity here, it is acknowledged that such labels can be stigmatising, disempowering and unhelpful in supporting behavioural change or recovery. And, much as the boundary between perpetrator and victim of offending behaviour is often blurred, so too is the distinction between bully and victim.

The impact of bullying
Bullying can cause lasting harm to individuals. Being a victim has been associated with suicide, self-harm, poor school attendance and achievement, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, as well as other mental and physical health outcomes, often lasting into adulthood. Children involved in carrying out bullying behaviours (bullies) are at risk of later suicide, offending, violence, and substance misuse. Those who are involved in bullying at both ends of the spectrum (bully-victims) tend to have the poorest outcomes of all. The effects of bullying can extend beyond those immediately involved, with witnesses and bystanders also experiencing a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing. However, it is also important to note that not all children who are affected by bullying will go on to develop negative outcomes, and understanding the factors (situational, individual, relational etc.) that support resilience will be important for recovery.

Bullying and offending
There is no legal definition of bullying in Scotland, hence bullying in itself is not a crime, although some bullying behaviours may constitute a crime. However, research does suggest a relationship between bullying and offending behaviours. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 29 studies concluded there is a highly significant association between bullying perpetration and later offending. The relationship between bullying perpetration and later violence tends to be even stronger, with a meta-analysis of 15 studies concluding that the odds of involvement in violence were twice as great for those involved in bullying perpetration.

What may be less anticipated is that there is also an association between being a victim of bullying and later offending, although the relationship is less clear and not as strong as for bullying perpetration. There is also a stronger link between bullying victimisation and later involvement in violent behaviours, which may partly explain why being bullied in school is the

most common adverse childhood experience reported by [people in prison]. Implicated in this association may be the role of an important [subset of victims] who display increased anxiety and aggressiveness, and can respond to provocation more impulsively, emotionally and unpredictably than a 'typical' bully. In the most extreme example, it has been [observed] that the majority of perpetrators in US high school shootings had been, or perceived themselves to be, victims of bullying.

It is not always clear how bullying and offending interact. For example, there are [debates] about whether bullying, aggression, offending and violence are simply expressions of the same underlying construct that are interpreted differently depending on the context of the behaviour (for instance, the age of the child, or the social setting).

It may be that offending (or other deviation from social norms) is a reason for victimisation, rather than a symptom. Or there may be other factors at play which mediate the relationship with offending. For example, exclusion and peer rejection are often feature of bullying behaviour, but additionally social isolation is a risk factor for being bullied, and bullies are often rejected by more prosocial peers or excluded from school and other activities. It may be these experiences that contribute to the risk of offending, rather than the bullying per se.

Data from Interventions for Vulnerable Youth (IVY)
The [IVY Project] promotes best practice in forensic and clinical mental health risk assessment and management for children who present a serious risk of harm to others. Data for 209 children referred to IVY were included in the analysis to identify the presence of bullying and other relevant factors, although there are limitations with this.

Around two-thirds had been affected by bullying (29% as a victim, 24% as a perpetrator and 10% as both victim and perpetrator). Children who had not been involved in bullying (either as a victim or perpetrator) were less likely to have been involved in violence. Eighty seven percent of children who were 'bullies' had also been involved in violence, as had 83% of 'bully-victims'. Case records included several examples of children who had retaliated with violent behaviours as a direct result of being bullied.

The literature about social exclusion was borne out in the IVY sample. Every single one of the 'bully-victims' were rejected by their peers, as were 81% of 'victims' and 64% of 'bullies', compared to only 14% of those uninvolved in bullying. Children involved in bullying were significantly more likely to be excluded from school (86% of 'bullies' and 83% of 'bully-victims', compared to 35% of those uninvolved in bullying). Two important features of exclusion emerged in the data: system exclusion and self-exclusion. For example, children were excluded from school as a result of allegations of harmful sexual behaviour, or were educated under such restrictive conditions that there was no social interaction with peers. Strict bail conditions left children very socially isolated for long periods of time. Even where formal restrictions were not in place, concerns from parents, carers or professionals led to high levels of monitoring and supervision that precluded social interaction. Other children found social interactions stressful and anxiety-provoking, opting to self-withdraw from schools or social relationships, and this was especially true of children who were suffering from neuro-developmental disorders such as Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Implications for practice
Bullying can have a wide-ranging and enduring impact on everyone who comes into contact with it, and therefore approaches that focus on universal prevention, promote tolerance and celebrate diversity will be important. Practitioners should be aware of the association between bullying, victimisation and later offending, while remaining mindful of the effects of labelling and stigma, as well as the remarkable resilience some children display in the face of adversity. There is also a perpetuating cycle of exclusion, rejection and behavioural responses to bullying, which may exacerbate poor outcomes. Schools should promote inclusion within their bullying policies wherever possible, and justice practitioners should be aware of the potential for bail conditions, court orders and risk management procedures to contribute to social isolation and exclusion.