What is the prevalence of bullying in schools?

- There is no single 'student population' prevalence rate for bullying that can be used across contexts with confidence. All research on this topic includes cautions and limitations about the use of prevalence figures.

- Differences in research design and methodology — including varied reporting and data collection, varied student population characteristics, and differing forms of bullying investigated — mean a single prevalence figure for bullying has not been firmly established.

- Where a single prevalence figure is suggested for general use, it is usually calculated using the prevalence figures found across a large number of studies.

- A single prevalence figure may hide complex and important details about which students are more likely to be involved and when, which, if left unacknowledged, could contribute to the failure of anti-bullying strategies.

- Research has established that, not only does bullying prevalence vary at different times of the year, there is also a need to distinguish between persistent bullying and bullying that is time-limited.

- Prevalence also varies across student age ranges, with well-recognised peaks at various stages of certain ages (mid-primary school) and at times of transition (primary to high school). As well, some subgroups of students appear more likely to experience bullying than others.

- With this complexity potentially obscured, a single 'student population' prevalence figure from research may be of limited value for schools in informing their response to bullying.

- Another issue in establishing the prevalence of bullying in research is some students' unwillingness to report, or the reluctance of many to talk about bullying with adults. This affects data sources and the validity of research findings.

- Students have told researchers that they do not report bullying because they fear not being believed or not having their concerns appropriately and thoughtfully addressed by relevant adults. Different understandings of what constitutes bullying may also contribute to a failure to report.

- The reluctance of students to report bullying could potentially misinform research hypotheses and recommendations for practice because they are based only on the experiences of those who are willing to report bullying.

- Research has shown a strong relationship between positive relationships with teachers and students' willingness to report bullying.

- The best estimate extrapolated from the research is that one student in four reports bullying occurring in person, and one student in five reports online bullying, but these figures should be used with caution.

- Debate continues on whether the rate of bullying is increasing, or whether the community is less tolerant of bullying, leading to greater awareness and higher levels of reporting.

- The 'need to know' the scale of the problem of bullying is understandable, but quantifying what is essentially a social relationship dynamic is indeed challenging. Some academics suggest it is not quantifiable.

Implications for schools

- Prevalence figures from research provide general information for schools, but have limited value to inform schools' approaches to bullying.

- In order to identify important variations in bullying prevalence across time and across student subgroups within the school community, schools need to gather rich local data which will better inform their anti-bullying initiatives.

- Collecting data on the number of incidents is only part of getting a full picture of the school. Student surveys and school 'audits' integrated within the school's regular and ongoing monitoring will provide rich detailed information on which to plan prevention and responses.

- Data-based decision-making at a local level allows schools to plan, communicate and monitor the effectiveness of their approach.

- Schools can target their resources to those student ages/stages with an identified peak in bullying, i.e. during Years 4–5 and at the transition to, and first year in, high school.

- Students' willingness and confidence to report bullying may depend on the appropriateness of the processes the school provides for students to talk to staff, and on appropriate and respectful responses.

- Finding ways to encourage accurate and timely reporting of bullying helps schools to gain a more accurate picture of bullying in their community.

- Enhancing positive teacher–student relationships is a key area for school action to promote student reporting of bullying.

- The nature of bullying points to the need for schools to investigate and understand their local situation well, and to target anti-bullying strategies according to their own findings.

- Schools need to ensure they treat any report of bullying as an opportunity for all students involved to learn how to behave more appropriately, to resolve conflict in appropriate ways, and to navigate their social networks through respectful relationships.

Want to know more?

This research snapshot is based on *A review of literature (2010–2014) on student bullying by Australia's Safe and Supportive School Communities Working Group.* (2015).

Other research snapshots on student bullying are available at Bullying. No Way!

Further information on bullying and on student safety and wellbeing can be found at: www.bullyingnoway. gov.au and www.safeschoolshub.edu.au

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