

Article 7:

Kan-Rice, Pamela. "School Bullies Are Often Also Victims; Feeling Safe Reduces Youth Bullying." *University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources News and Information Outreach*. AScribe Health News Service. 2 Sept, 2003. Infotrac July 08, 2004. < <http://news.ucanr.org/newsstorymain.cfm?story=502>>

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¶1 OAKLAND, Calif., Sept. 2 (AScribe News) -- School bullies are often themselves the victims of bullying, according to University of California Cooperative Extension researchers who conducted a study of Oakland middle school students aged 11 to 14.

¶2 In response to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo., many educators began trying to "bully-proof" their schools. UC Cooperative Extension youth development advisors Charles Go and Shelley Murdock surveyed Oakland middle school students to get a clearer picture of the bullies and their victims. Based on the responses of 1,137 students, 1 out of 10 youth reported having been threatened with a weapon in the last 12 months. But interestingly, half of these teens reported perpetrator behaviors such as using a weapon and selling drugs.

¶3 In response to the questions indicating bullying behavior, 36 percent of the youth reported having been in a physical fight; 9 percent used a weapon to threaten someone; 6 percent sold drugs and 11 percent had been arrested in school at least once during the past year.

¶4 Responding to victimization questions, 10 percent had been threatened with a weapon within the past year. About 20 percent of the youth reported they were offered, sold or given drugs at least once in school. Also within the past year, 24 percent had been teased about their race and 29 percent had had property stolen from them or damaged at school.

¶5 The boys were more likely to be perpetrators than girls were, but were just as likely to be victims. Boys were no more likely than girls were to feel safe at school. Perhaps surprisingly, the bullies didn't feel safer than their victims did. "It is most likely because they know their victims may retaliate," Go said.

¶6 Go and Murdock, who are based at UC Cooperative Extension in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, respectively, concluded there are myriad factors that influence bullying, such as the youth's home life and racial tension. "If a parent tells the kid to hit people who are messing with them, then you need to talk to the parent," Go explained. Youths who have been beaten because of their race may join gangs for protection.

¶7 Quelling school violence is not as simple as weeding out the bullies and "fixing" them, according to Go. A youth who has been bullied may get caught retaliating or picking on someone else. "It's easy to label one a bully," Go said, "but it really depends on where you catch them in the cycle. Perpetrators get victimized too."

¶8 A more effective approach may be to ask the individual, "Why are you doing this?" then to try to break the circle of bullying. Go suggests teaching youth different ways of negotiating the situation, such as conducting teen conflict resolution education programs, providing alternative creative venues such as physical education in resolving conflicts, or providing positive adult mentors to help teens deal with their problems.

¶9 Another effective approach may be to work in helping our teens feel safer in school. Go and Murdock found that 84 percent of the middle school students reported feeling very safe or safe in their own neighborhoods, but that figure dropped to 70 percent when the students were asked how they felt in school. Thirteen percent claimed they stayed home one or more days because they were afraid to go to school. Interestingly, they also found that when the teens felt safe in their schools, both the youth perpetrator and victim behaviors tended to decrease.

¶10 If schools send a message about the type of behavior that is unacceptable, it establishes ground rules, says Go. They need to make clear the consequences. If a school protects all its students, then they feel safer and don't have to defend themselves.

¶11 Bullying behavior is part of adolescent development, according to Go. "They're trying to figure out what they can get away with. And it can be a search for identity, to learn social relationships and peer relations," he said. Go cited the classic example of a child who pesters the bigger kids until he gets whopped. Some might call that learning the hard way.

¶12 "One thing that this study elucidates is that there is no magic bullet for stopping bullying," Murdock said. "As with most societal issues, it is more complex and requires a more complex intervention than a simple curriculum."

¶13 The researchers chose to focus on middle school students because in 1998, nearly 60 percent of all students suspended in Oakland Unified School District were in middle school. Four times as many 6th graders were suspended as 5th graders. The questionnaire was anonymous and confidential and available in English, Spanish and Vietnamese.