

The Economic Cost of Bullying in Australian Schools

By Faye Williamson

In Australia, there are approximately 910,000 students who are victims of bullying each year, totalling an estimated 45 million bullying incidents across all schools, instigated by around 543,000 bully perpetrators.

Prevalence of Bullying

Bullying is classified into three main categories; overt bullying, covert bullying and cyber bullying.

Overt Bullying

Overt bullying is the most commonly cited form of bullying, where the bullying incident can be seen in plain sight, be it physical violence, verbal or visible exclusion of a victim. As overt bullying can be observed, it is more easily detected and addressed.

However, overt bullying can sometimes go undetected and in some cases can lead to serious physical injuries.

The prevalence of overt bullying in Australian schools is such that:

- 16 per cent of males reported that they were physically threatened or hurt compared to 9 per cent of females
- 19 per cent of males and 25 per cent of females reported that they were deliberately left out by other students.

Covert Bullying

Covert bullying is defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is 'hidden', out of sight of, or unacknowledged by adults.

It includes spreading rumours about students, hand gestures, weird or threatening looks, blackmailing and purposeful exclusion that is not obvious to bystanders or teachers.

The prevalence of covert bullying in Australian schools is such that:

- a low portion of students (5 per cent) identified as having had covertly bullied others
- 16 per cent reported being bullied covertly every few weeks or more often in one term

“...includes spreading rumours about students, hand gestures, weird or threatening looks, blackmailing and purposeful exclusion...”

- 61 per cent of students who had been bullied in any way had experienced covert bullying.

Cyber Bullying

Cyber Bullying has evolved with technology and the rise of social media. Cyber bullying is a form of traditional bullying exercised through social media and other online communication platforms and is an emerging trend that is driving prevalence rates of bullying. As there is a likelihood of being underreported, the prevalence of cyber bullying is more difficult to estimate.

The prevalence estimates of cyber bullying across Australian students are wide ranging, at between 6 per cent and 40 per cent of students.

It is noted that the best estimate for a 12 month period is that over 20 per cent of students aged between 8 and 17 years of age have been victims of cyber bullying, however 33 per cent of girls compared to 25 per cent of boys experienced recent cyber bullying (within the last 30 days).





Economic Costs of Bullying

Costs experienced during school years

Productivity Costs

Cost of carers for students at home, due to suspension (perpetrators of bullying) or fear to attend school (victims of bullying).

Direct health service costs during school years

- GP costs, due to the direct impacts of bullying which may include injury or self-harm. Twenty-three per cent of bullied students who sought help or support for bullying (50% of all bullied students) sought help from a GP.
- Mental health costs, due to the direct impacts of bullying which include injury or self-harm. Of the 50% of victims of bullying who sought help due to bullying, 14% turned to a mental health professional.
- Acute care costs, due to the direct impacts of bullying.

Health, personal and community costs

Police involvement costs, 4.2% of victims and 6.2% of teachers turned to the police in relation to bullying incidents.

Indirect costs experienced by schools

Senior staff time spent addressing bullying issues, on average, 10 hours per week of senior staff time is spent dealing with bullying

incidents in primary schools compared to 20 hours per week in secondary schools.

Long term costs that continue after school

Individual costs

Decreased educational attainment impact on income potential, due to missed school days impacting on performance. Students who are bullied earn on average \$7,000 less in income in the 20 years after finishing school compared to those who are not.

Health, personal and community costs

- Ongoing mental health costs, that continue as a result of bullying in school years.
- Ongoing obesity costs, because female victims of bullying are particularly prone to obesity solely as a result of bullying, with an estimated 12% of female victims dealing with obesity in adulthood due to bullying in their school years.
- Eating disorder costs, 10% of female victims of bullying will suffer an eating disorder in their adult life as a direct effect of bullying.
- Suicide, 5 students in 6 years take their own life as a result of bullying. ■

Source: 'The Economic Cost of Bullying in Australian Schools', Alannah and Madeline Foundation, March 2018