

THE BULLYING CRISIS

Drivers and Consequences Among Young Men in the US

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE BULLYING CRISIS: DRIVERS AND CONSEQUENCES AMONG YOUNG MEN IN THE US: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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WHY THIS STUDY?

How common are experiences of bullying in the social and online lives of young men in the United States (US)? How do masculine norms, young men's empathy, and other factors influence these dynamics? What are the consequences?

Building on prior research by Promundo-US and Axe, Unilever's leading male grooming brand, and in line with a burgeoning field of bullying research, this study explores how young men use, experience, witness, and intervene to stop multiple forms of physical, social, and online bullying using a nationally representative sample in the US. In addition, this report explores young men's attitudes about masculinity in relation to their bullying behaviors, tests associations between empathy and bullying, and documents patterns of men's cyberbullying, all in an effort to grow this knowledge base.

WHY BULLYING?

Without a doubt, men and boys' bullying takes many forms, with significant harmful impacts on men and boys themselves, as well as girls, women, and gender and sexual minorities.

In a 2017 study by Promundo-US and Axe, the precursor to this study, upwards of one-third of young men in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Mexico reported using verbal, physical, and/or online bullying behaviors in the month prior to data collection (Heilman, Barker, & Harrison, 2017). Across contexts, being bullied has been shown to negatively impact mental health, the ability to perform work, relationships with peers or colleagues, and long-term relationships (Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Munroe, n.d.; Samnani & Singh, 2012; Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

WHO PARTICIPATED?

This study draws upon a nationally representative sample of young men aged 18 to 24 residing in the United States.

A pilot study was conducted in December 2017 with 100 respondents. The pilot study data were used to make minor adjustments to the survey to ensure accessibility for respondents and to assess the feasibility of the survey's length. Once the survey was revised based on the results of the pilot study, the full study sample of approximately 1,000 respondents was sought out in January 2018. The final sample consisted of 1,068 men. The sample was selected to be representative of young men from all income, educational, and ethnic groups – as well as from urban and rural settings – across all geographic regions of the United States.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

First, the report presents the prevalence and patterns of bullying behaviors among different groups of young men across the country.

Patterns of general bullying

General bullying experiences and practices are divided into “direct bullying” – referring to forms of physical and verbal bullying – and “indirect bullying” – referring to forms of social and relational bullying. Significant proportions of respondents reported using and experiencing direct forms of bullying. Respondents also almost universally reported witnessing all forms of direct physical and verbal confrontation and social and relational forms of bullying measured in this study. Respondents reported high rates of using and experiencing indirect bullying – involving hurting someone’s reputation or relationships – as well. Encouragingly, however, men in the study seemed very willing to step in on behalf of or defend those targeted by bullying. Nearly three-fourths of participants reported having intervened on behalf of someone being insulted because of the way they look or dress.

Data also show that direct bullying occurs in relation to one’s appearance, with three-fourths of respondents reporting that they had been verbally bullied because of the way they look or dress. The findings also demonstrate that making fun of someone because of their race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation was frequent. In fact, a total of 448 men in the sample reported being made fun of because of their sexual orientation, a significantly higher number of respondents than those self-identifying as gay, bisexual, or another non-heterosexual sexual orientation.

Patterns of cyberbullying

Meaningful proportions of young men reported being targeted by bullying online, and many men also revealed their own cyberbullying behaviors. Posting unflattering images of someone on the internet without their approval was the most frequent form of cyberbullying. As many as one in 10 men had experienced at least one form of cyberbullying in the previous month alone. Among young men willing to share their direct experiences of being targeted by recent cyberbullying, the most common forms were negative comments about one's appearance and hurtful or mean jokes, rumors, or gossip. Even though young men were not very likely to report doing it themselves, the young men's responses demonstrate that cyberbullying is occurring all around them. Many young men said that they intervene to stop these online behaviors when they see them, though there is room for encouraging greater bystander intervention. Respondents were most likely to report having intervened to stop bullying related to sexual orientation and appearance.

On one hand, the vast majority of young men revealed that they had seen bullying in their online lives as well as "away from the keyboard." On the other hand, comparatively fewer men in the sample said that they had used any bullying behaviors, online or offline, recently or early in their lives.

Second, the report explores the influence of various drivers of bullying activity, seeking to understand why bullying persists.

Gender attitudes

Many young men hold restrictive ideas about how to "be a real man," and these ideas show strong links to bullying behaviors. A 2017 study by Promundo-US and Axe, the predecessor to this study, demonstrated that many men in the US, UK, and Mexico can be said to be "in the Man Box" – meaning they espouse more rigid, harmful ideas about what men should believe and how they should behave (Heilman, Barker, & Harrison, 2017). After accounting for variations due to age, relationship status, and working status, this study found that being in the Man Box is associated with a lower likelihood of experiencing general bullying but a greater likelihood of using both general bullying and cyberbullying. Moreover, those men who are in the Man Box are less likely to intervene to stop both general bullying and cyberbullying situations. In other words, men who believe that "being a man" should imply self-reliance, aggressiveness, toughness, and other restrictive characteristics are more likely to be bullies.

Empathy

Young men in the study show broad – though not universal – empathetic traits. Deeper statistical analysis reveals that even if overall empathy rates are relatively high, having higher levels of empathy is significantly linked with a higher likelihood of intervening to stop bullying.

In terms of bystander intervention, young men's ideas and intentions are sometimes at odds with one another. Many report that they would *not* do anything for fear of retaliation, and simultaneously say that they would intervene in many positive ways. This contradiction and uncertainty present an opportunity for greater coaching, encouragement, and social norms shifts around safe bystander intervention approaches and options.

Bullying-supportive attitudes

Young men in the study generally did not look favorably on bullying, but those who did tended to follow up their attitudes with harmful actions. The study demonstrated clearly that attitudes justifying bullying – for instance, believing that “picking on others is fun” or that “people who look weird or look different are asking to be teased” – were statistically linked with being a bully.

Finally, the report investigates the consequences of bullying experiences on young men's health and well-being.

Self-esteem

Young men's self-esteem is relatively high but demonstrates strong links with their experiences of bullying. In fact, the only category linked with an increase in men's self-reported life satisfaction was intervening to stop general bullying. Experiencing both general bullying and cyberbullying was linked with a decrease in life satisfaction. The desire to change one's appearance and to be more confident in real life showed multiple strong links to cyberbullying behaviors.

Depressive tendencies

All four manifestations of general bullying and three of the four manifestations of cyberbullying show strong associations with young men's depressive tendencies: The more bullying they encounter or use, the greater these tendencies become.

Overall well-being

In the majority of domains, as young men's interactions with bullying increased, their well-being scores decreased at statistically significant levels. For general bullying, this relationship held true for experiencing and using bullying; for cyberbullying, this relationship held true for experiencing, witnessing, and intervening to stop bullying.



This report demonstrates that bullying is a predominant feature of young men's online and offline lives and that various bullying experiences have strong and important links with negative health and well-being outcomes.



However, many young men also shared that they had intervened to stop bullying when they saw it, with nearly three-fourths of participants reporting that they had stepped in on behalf of someone who was insulted because of the way they look or dress, for example. Even as proximity to bullying was nearly universal among respondents, one can rightly draw hope from young men's willingness to intervene, their high reported rates of empathy, and the statistical linkages that emerged between these two factors. Just as strongly as young men's restrictive ideas about masculinity prompt them to bully others, their empathetic traits and beliefs prompt them to stop bullying when they see it.



These findings continue to build the evidence base on the widespread scope and negative consequences of bullying for young men. They also shed new light on the drivers and consequences of these behaviors and therefore the policy and programming avenues that may mitigate further harm.



For instance, the findings demonstrate that witnessing bullying in one's social or online life is associated with negative health outcomes, in some cases of equal or greater magnitude to those experienced by victims. This finding calls for increased, multi-component bullying prevention campaigns and policies with a broader focus on the harmful environment created for everyone when bullying behaviors are prevalent. Beyond this recommendation, results urge future programmers and policymakers to explore new research and solutions addressing the gamut of bullying experiences and also to devote particular attention to transforming young men's harmful gender norms and amplifying their empathetic traits and abilities. Bullying dynamics are multifaceted and enormously harmful; as such, any prevention and response mechanisms need to be equally nuanced and multifaceted. The struggle to end the harms of bullying is undeniably difficult, but this gender-transformative approach calls on everyone to play a role.

