Understanding Bullying: A White Paper from Invictus Consulting, LLC

A Boston Globe film critic recently did a piece listing the top television and movie bullies that "we love to hate," including Nelson Muntz ("The Simpsons"), Biff Tannen ("Back to the Future"), and Regina George ("Mean Girls"). Let's not forget Draco Malfoy ("Harry Potter"), Gaston ("Beauty and the Beast"), and Javert ("Les Miserables"). The "Meanies of Life" piece, surely meant as pure entertainment and nothing more, stated that bullies are necessary to the human narrative. Get an attractive actor to play the part, maybe give them a catchy song to sing, end the story with the bully receiving their come-uppance, and you have a neat and comfortable portrayal of a bully.
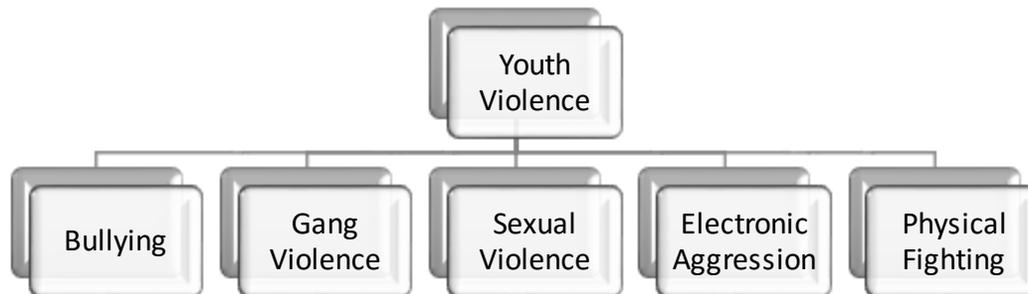
The reality of bullying in schools is vastly different from that seen on television and in movies, and real life victims of bullies would undoubtedly balk at the notion that bullies are necessary to the human narrative. Bullying in a serious threat that children, teens, and school teachers and administrators face these days. Although the news media sensationalizes the more dramatic instances of school bullying (e.g., school shootings), the fact is that other forms of aggression are much more prevalent in schools and may present a greater threat to the wellbeing of students.

Definition of Bullying

Youth violence is a substantial and complex societal problem. More youth die from homicide each year than all the other top seven causes of death combined (i.e., cancer, heart disease, birth defects, flu and pneumonia, respiratory diseases, stroke, and diabetes). Youth violence is influenced by four factors: community (social connectedness, residential instability, gang activity), individual (past exposure to violence, impulsiveness), societal (norms about violence, policies surrounding job opportunities, policies surrounding violence prevention), and relational (peer delinquency, parental conflict, adult supervision).

Bullying is one element that falls under the general umbrella of youth violence.

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The academic definition of bullying comes from researcher Dan Olweus, a Swedish born scholar who has spent the past 40 years doing research and intervention work on bullying in schools. He defined bullying in the following terms: "A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself." This is the definition of bullying currently used by UNSECO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and it encapsulates three important factors:
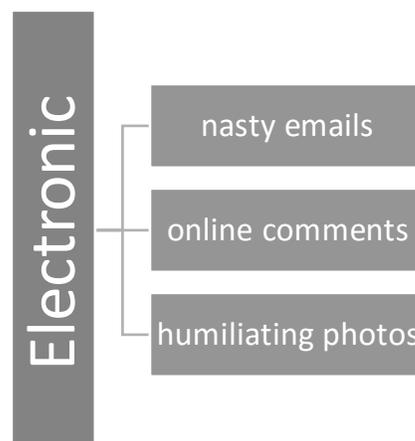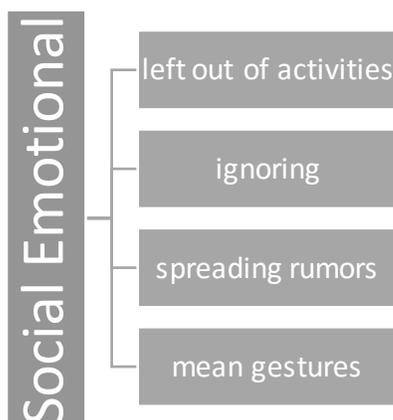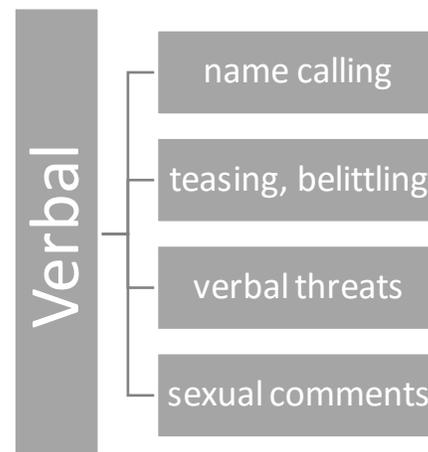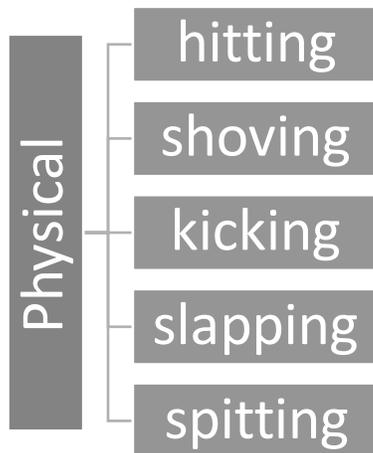
- It is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions
- It is a pattern of behavior repeated over time
- It involves an imbalance in power or strength

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has created their own definition of bullying as, "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated." Notably, this definition includes the same three important facets as Olweus' definition, namely that is unwanted and aggressive, it is repeated, and it involves a power imbalance. It has been noted by Olweus that the aggressive nature of bullying is often proactive, meaning that it occurs without provocation

on the part of the victim. (Reactive aggression, on the other hand, occurs after being provoked by an individual or group.)

Different institutions use different words to categorize and understand bullying, but most agree that there are four distinct types: **physical, verbal, social emotional, and electronic**.

Physical
- hitting
- shoving
- kicking
- slapping
- spitting

Verbal
- name calling
- teasing, belittling
- verbal threats
- sexual comments

Social Emotional
- left out of activities
- ignoring
- spreading rumors
- mean gestures

Electronic
- nasty emails
- online comments
- humiliating photos

One further type of bullying that is not as commonly used in definitions is that of damaging the victim's property. This includes theft, alteration, or damage to the victim's property. It may include taking the victim's property and refusing to give it back, destroying a victim's property in their presence, or deleting or destroying the victim's personal cyber information/property.

The CDC further refines bullying as either **direct or indirect**. Direct bullying is aggressive behavior that occurs in the presence of the victim, while indirect bullying is not directly communicated to the victim. Indirect bullying includes such things as spreading rumors and posting derogatory or embarrassing photos or comments about the victim online.

There is some data indicating that boys more commonly engage in direct physical bullying while girls more commonly engage in indirect bullying such as spreading rumors, social isolation, and excluding victims. It has been suggested that because girls value their social relationships more than boys do, their form of bullying aims to damage the social relationships of the victim (via gossip, isolation, etc.). Moreover, boy victims experience direct bullying more frequently, and girl victims experience indirect bullying more frequently. In other words, boys engage in and experience direct bullying while girls engage in and experience indirect bullying. While the form of bullying girls most often experience is indirect bullying, the consequences of that bullying are anything but indirect;

> Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated.

in fact, girls seem to suffer more negative psychological effects (distress, worsening mental health and well-being) from bullying than do boys. Research indicates that bullying causes a significant decrease in self-esteem for girls as compared to boys. While bullying has been correlated with delinquency, gang membership, and drug use for both boys and girls, it is correlated with decreased self-esteem only for girls. This data points to an interesting postulation: prevention and intervention efforts can be gender-neutral for direct bullying, while gender-specific prevention and intervention efforts are more appropriate for indirect bullying.

Individuals can be the victim of bullying, the perpetrator of bullying, or both (i.e., a bully/victim). **Bullying affects the physical and emotional health of both victims and perpetrators.** Both victims and perpetrators can be physically injured. Victims often suffer from depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, poor school performance, and suicidal feelings. Perpetrators are at an increased risk for substance abuse, academic difficulties, and further violence. In fact, perpetrators often go on to commit violence later in life; abuse their spouse, domestic partner, and family; engage in frequent fights; perpetrate sexual violence; and may face jail time and criminal charges. There is also evidence to suggest that bullying may be intergenerational, where bullies are more likely to have children that are bullies and victims are more likely to have children that are themselves victims of bullying. Bully/victims seem to suffer the most serious consequences of bullying compared to either victims or bullies. This would make sense, where the bully/victim faces the negative effects of being a victim of bullying in addition to the negative effects of being a bully. In fact, there seems to be evidence that the consequences of being a bully, victim, or bully/victim may be long-term and carry into adulthood, causing low self-esteem, low self-worth, depression, antisocial behavior, vandalism, drug use and abuse, criminal behavior, gang membership, and suicidal ideation.

In addition to the negative consequences felt by bullies and their victims, there is some indication that youth who witness bullying often have feelings of guilt and helplessness for not helping the victim and not confronting the bully. Fear of being bullied themselves also tends to make witnesses of bullying separate themselves from bullying victims, which further isolates victims. Olweus has put forward a model that describes multiple levels of bullying witnesses: followers/henchmen take an active part in the bullying but do not initiate it; supporters support

the bullying but do not engage in it; passive supporters like the bullying but do not overtly or outwardly support it; disengaged onlookers watch the bullying but take no action; possible defenders dislike the bullying and want to help out but do not take any action; and defenders dislike the bullying and take action to stop it or defend the victim.

Bullying often fails to be reported by both victims of bullying and witnesses of bullying. The reasons why children often fail to report bullying are varied, but research has uncovered many of them including:

- Fear of retaliation (i.e., being further bullied)
- Shame at not being able to stand up for oneself
- Fear that they won't be believed
- Suspicion that nothing will change even if they do report the bullying
- Fear that adult advice/actions will make things worse
- Fear of being labeled a snitch or tattletale
- Fear of arousing the ire of the bully on themselves (if they're a witness and report the event)

Commonalities among bullied individuals include having a lower peer status, a lower social competence, negative community factors (e.g., violence in their community), and a negative school climate. Commonalities among perpetrators of bullying include significant externalizing behavior (i.e., acting out their aggression), poor social competence, academic challenges, a negative attitude toward others, a family characterized by conflict and criticism, a tendency to be impulsive, low empathy levels, and general uncooperativeness. No one of these factors *causes* an individual to be a victim or a perpetrator of bullying, but the statistics indicate that victims and perpetrators do hold the above characteristics in common. Interestingly, stereotypical images of a bullying victim as a child who is overweight, wears glasses, and speaks with an unusual pattern do not seem to hold up to quantitative research on bullying.

Commonalities among victims and perpetrators is a somewhat different issue than factors that may contribute to being a victim or being a bully. The nuance may seem minor, but the

commonalities explained above are descriptors that researchers have found are common to victims and bullies, while contributing factors are circumstances that increase an individual's chance of being either a victim or a bully. Again, no one factor will cause an individual to be a bully or a victim, but the following factors are associated with a higher likelihood of being either a victim or a perpetrator. Specifically, poor peer relationships, low self-esteem, and being perceived by peers and being quiet or different are factors that are associated with a higher likelihood of being a victim of bullying; externalizing problems, defiant and disruptive behavior, harsh parenting by caregivers, and an accepting attitude towards violence are factors that are associated with a higher likelihood of being a bully.

Moreover, it has been shown that youth who experience bullying (either as a victim, bully, or bully/victim) often experience violence in other parts of their life including child maltreatment, dating violence, gang violence, and abuse by adults.

YRBSS (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System)

There is some indication that fully 75% of school shootings are linked to bullying and harassment. This statistic is quoted by organizations devoted to preventing bullying including NoBullying.com, National Voices for Equality Education and Enlightenment, and Ark of Hope for Children. However, none of these resources points the original source of this statistic, and secondary information that points to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) as the source of the data cannot be corroborated. The CDC does conduct research through their Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) every other year (i.e., odd numbered years), and while they do collect data on behaviors that contribute to violence and bullying, a careful review of the reports from 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015 show no indication that this statistic came from the CDC's YRBSS. In fact, research by Peter Langman, Ph.D., an expert on the psychology of school shooters, finds that bullying against (or by) school shooters is inconsistent and nearly impossible to corroborate. His research points to evidence that 40% of school shooters were bullied and a little over 50% were themselves bullies. The point here is that it is best to take the statistic that 75% of school shootings are linked to

bullying and harassment with a grain of salt. Bullying is a real and large threat, as are school shootings, but we mustn't confuse data with unsubstantiated claims.

The YRBSS is informative for the purposes of bullying because it tracks the health-risk behaviors associated with the leading causes of death among youth (i.e., motor vehicle crashes, unintentional injury, homicide, and suicide). The YRBSS tracks six categories that contribute to the leading causes of death among youth; these six categories are: behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence; tobacco use; alcohol and drug use; sexual behaviors related to unwanted pregnancy, HIV, and STDs; unhealthy diet; and physical inactivity. Bullying falls under the first category, behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence.

The CDC considers carrying a weapon, carrying a gun, being threatened or injured with a weapon, being in a physical fight, not going to school because of safety concern, being electronically bullied, being bullied, being forced to have sexual intercourse, being physically harmed by a dating partner, being sexually harmed by a dating partner, feeling sad or hopeless, seriously considering suicide, making a suicide plan, and attempting suicide as behaviors that contribute to youth violence. Cyber bullying and bullying are two of these behaviors, and it could be reasoned that some of the other behaviors (such as being sad or depressed, carrying a weapon, physical fighting) are factors that contribute to bullying.

The YRBSS is revealing about bullying in high schools in the United States. Data from 2015 indicate that roughly 20% of students were bullied on school property, which is a number that has remained relatively consistent over the past decade. The numbers are similarly high and consistent for cyber bullying, holding steady at around 15%. While the percentage of students who carry a weapon on school grounds has decreased over the past couple of decades, the overall percentage of students who skip school because they feel unsafe at school (or on the way to school) has increased. The prevalence of being cyber bullied, bullied, and skipping school due to safety concerns were all higher among females than males. Gender aside, Hispanics students were more likely than their white or black counterparts to skip school due to safety concerns. Some of the specifics for bullying are presented below:

Category	Constituent	%
Electronically Bullied	Female	21.7
	Male	9.7
	Total	15.5
	White	18.4
	Black	8.6
	Hispanic	12.4
	Total	15.5
Bullied on School Property	Female	24.8
	Male	15.8
	Total	20.2
	White	23.5
	Black	13.2
	Hispanic	16.5
	Total	20.2

The YRBSS works on conjunction with the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion on their *Healthy People 2020* initiative that sets specific and measurable goals in terms of the health of Americans. Specifically, objective number IVP-35 (under the Injury and Violence Prevention topic area) has the objective to, "reduce bullying among adolescents." Their 2020 target is 17.9%; data from the 2015 YRBSS shows that the current percentage is 20.2, which has remained relatively consistent over the past few decades. Clearly some work needs to be done to reach the 2020 target.

Case Study: Columbine

Initial assessments of the motives behind the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School pointed to bullying as one of the major motives of the two young men who perpetrated the violence. Alternately pegged as goths, loners, members of the Trench Coat Mafia, victims of the Trench Coat Mafia, bullies, and the victims of bullies, it is both clear that some sort of bullying was present in the lives of the shooters and unclear how extensive the bullying was and how much bullying factored in to their ultimate actions.

Evidence is pretty clear that both boys were bullied and engaged in bullying others; with that said, analysis of the event and the perpetrators has, over the decade and a half since the shooting, led analysts to conclude that bullying was not, in fact, the root cause of their behavior. According to Peter Langman (a psychologist) and Dave Cullen (a journalist), both experts on the Columbine shooting, Eric Harris was a true psychopath and Dylan Klebold was psychotic and depressed. The boys were not acting in revenge to bullies (i.e., in an attempt to gain freedom from bullies); they were not acting in a way to bully other students; they were acting to gain fame for themselves via a large scale bombing that would dwarf the carnage at the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. (The boys had planned to detonate two bombs inside the school, gun down the survivors, and then detonate the bombs planted in their cars as rescuers and news crews showed up in the parking lot. The fact that they mis-wired the bombs is the reason they opened fire inside the school when they did.)

Bullying was a part of the lives of Harris and Klebold, both as victims and perpetrators, but it does not seem to be the motivating factor in their attack on Columbine High School.

Prevention

According to the CDC, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention; and the Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students:

> It is not enough to know the magnitude and characteristics of a public health problem. It is also important to understand "why" it occurs and which factors protect people or put them at risk for experiencing or perpetrating violence. These factors help identify where prevention efforts need to be focused... With a better understanding of the factors that

place youth at risk for bullying, we can begin to develop and test prevention strategies that seek to change the relevant factors that increase a youth's risk in experiencing bullying.

At home, building an environment and establishing trusting relationships with adults where students feel comfortable discussing violence, bullying, and related concerns is an important step in preventing bullying. Specifically talking with youth about violence, letting them know that they are expected to behave in a nonviolent manner, and helping them develop coping skills to deal with their problems in violence-free ways are steps adults can take to address bullying. By knowing where their children are, knowing who their friends are, and supervising their media viewing, parents can help prevent bullying and victimization. Setting firm limits on unacceptable behavior has also been proven to be a solid at-home strategy to combat bullying.

In schools, the combinations of administrators, teachers, and parents are the first layer in preventing bullying. Research has found that the attitudes and behavior of relevant adults (e.g., teachers and administrators) plays a crucial role in the extent to which bullying is found in a particular school or classroom. It is important to note, however, that the level to which adults like using the anti-bullying procedures is much less important than how well the program works for the students.

A solid anti-bullying policy is the best defense against bullying in schools. Good anti-bullying policies include:

- A clear definition of bullying so that teachers and staff understand what it is and can identify it when they see it
- Specific measures/repercussions to handle bullying cases
- Commitment from teachers
- Cooperation from parents
- Agreement from students to report bullying

As with any type of risk management, prevention is the step you take before an incident in an attempt to mitigate the threat of the incident; if an incident has occurred, prevention did not work and you need to have a plan in place for crisis management. Bullying is no different – there are steps to take that can help prevent and mitigate bullying incidents, and a good anti-bullying policy will have procedures in place for how to deal with a range of bullying incidents. There is data to suggest that bullying begins to decline after the age of 14 or 15. This is a particularly important point for elementary school and middle school administrators and teachers to take in to account because bullying prevention programs work best if children are exposed to them repeatedly (i.e., annually) throughout their elementary and middle school years. Intervention in the early years is particularly important given that young bullies tend to remain bullies unless appropriate intervention occurs. Furthermore, bullying prevention programs should address both direct and indirect bullying.

Research out of the Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services gives some concrete steps schools can take to prevent bullying.

- Enlist the Principal or Headmaster's commitment and involvement
- Use a multi-faceted approach
    - school-wide
    - addresses direct bullying
    - addresses indirect bullying
    - provides guidelines to teachers, staff, and students on specific actions to take if bullying occurs
    - educates parents
    - provides procedures to meet with the parents of bullies
    - encourages students to help peers who are victims
    - utilizes environmental design to reduce opportunities for bullying
- Renew your efforts every year, reinforcing anti-bullying strategies every year with every student and teacher
- Increase student reporting of bullying

- o bully hot line
- o bully box (like a suggestion box but for reporting bullying)
- o seminars on the importance of reporting bullying
- Develop activities in less-supervised areas of the school (e.g., lunchroom, playground) to curb the behavior of bullies
- Stagger recess, lunch, and class release times to minimize the number of bullies and victims present at any given time
- Monitor areas where bullying is common (e.g., bathrooms, lunchrooms)
- Assign bullies to specific chores or tasks during release times to keep them occupied
- Post schoolwide signs describing bullying and the consequences
- Consistently enforce the rules and consequences
- Train teachers in spotting and handling bullying (particularly important for indirect bullying, which is not as easy to notice because it is often less overt)
- Make sure late-enrolling students are educated about the anti-bullying policy

Interestingly, there are some familiar tactics employed by schools that have ultimately been found to be ineffective. One is training students in conflict resolution; apparently this type of anti-bullying tactic often provides benefits only to those students who already have good conflict resolution skills and does little for those students (i.e., the victims and the bullies) who have poor conflict resolution skills. Another tactic that typically backfires is the "zero tolerance" policy towards bullying. This type of policy often results in high numbers of suspensions, which essentially gives the bully extra unsupervised time at home or out in the community. Furthermore, zero tolerance policies often lead to a decrease in reporting, since the reporting of an incident will most likely lead to a suspension. Finally, a zero tolerance policy often overlooks the underlying behaviors and issues of the individual in favor of simple suspension, thus neglecting the opportunity to change behavior. Providing self-esteem therapy for bullies is another common tactic that often falls flat. Research suggest that most bullies do not, in fact, lack self-esteem, so this tactic is a case of mis-deployment of resources.

Conclusion

Bullying is a multi-faceted issue that faces many of our young people. It is a serious issue that needs to be dealt with. Expelling every student who engages in bullying doesn't work. Ignoring that it's a problem doesn't work. Saying that bullying is a normal and necessary part of the American school experience is folly. Glorifying bullies in social media and the entertainment industry isn't helpful.

Bullying, like any other social problem, has been extensively studied, which means that there is statistical evidence pointing to what works and what doesn't work. In fact, understanding what does not work is just as important as understanding what does work. There has been a good deal of academic research done on the topic of bullying, but the most accessible source of information for parents, teachers, and administrators is the CDC. The CDC's Division of Violence Prevention acknowledges that violence is a serious public health problem, and they are committed to stopping violence before it begins. Within the Division of Violence Prevention is the Youth Violence Prevention program, and this program includes bullying as a major facet of youth violence. Visit the Youth Violence Prevention website to find a multitude of resources (fact sheets, research, measurement tools, strategies) to help understand and address this public health concern.
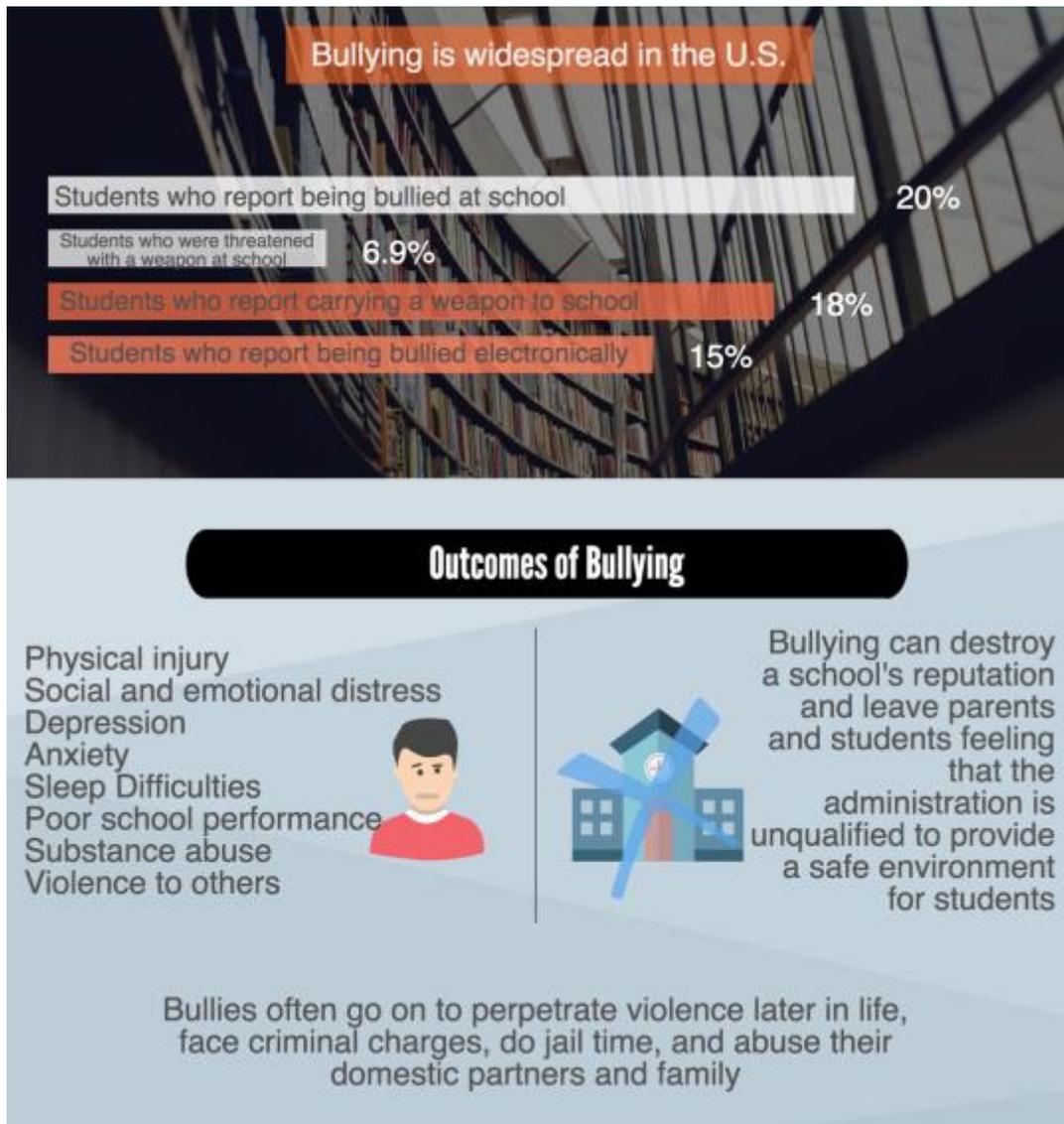
Bullying is widespread in the U.S.

Students who report being bullied at school — 20%

Students who were threatened with a weapon at school — 6.9%

Students who report carrying a weapon to school — 18%

Students who report being bullied electronically — 15%

Outcomes of Bullying

Physical injury
Social and emotional distress
Depression
Anxiety
Sleep Difficulties
Poor school performance
Substance abuse
Violence to others

Bullying can destroy a school's reputation and leave parents and students feeling that the administration is unqualified to provide a safe environment for students

Bullies often go on to perpetrate violence later in life, face criminal charges, do jail time, and abuse their domestic partners and family

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