HOT TOPICS

The Trouble with Bullies

A common assumption is that bullies are suffering from depression or low self-esteem. In a study of bullying among young adolescents, however, RAND and UCLA researchers determined that it is more common for bullies to be psychologically strong. Such behavior is considered “cool” and bystanders often encourage bullies. Jaana Juvonen, lead author of the study, states that the popularity of bullies in our culture should be a concern. Although young teens may try to avoid their company, bullies are usually admired and considered popular among students.

Not surprisingly, children who are victims of bullying do experience emotional distress, depression, and social anxiety that may not be observable to their teachers. The most troubled group identified in the study is made up of students who both bully and are bullied. Although peers shun victims, these “bully-victims” are the most ostracized group compared with other students. Researchers find that bully-victims also exhibit greater behavioral problems and are the least engaged in school.

Prior studies regarding bullying primarily rely on self-reports. This approach may not accurately reflect behavior, especially when students are asked about mistreating others. This study incorporates three different perspectives by asking students their perceptions of themselves as well as their peers and includes a teacher assessment of a student’s academic and social conduct.

The findings of the study are especially useful for those who implement or develop antibullying programs.

Read more: Bullying in Schools Pervasive, Disruptive and Serious

The Impact of Community Violence on Children

In the United States, the numbers of violent injuries and homicides among adolescents remain at disconcertingly high levels. Equally disturbing is the number of youth who commit violent acts every year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lists exposure to violence in a neighborhood or community as one of the potential risk factors that leads to violent behavior and other problems.

In a recent review of literature concerning youth exposure to community violence, RAND researchers discuss the limitations of current knowledge and some of the directions for future study of the issue. The researchers find that the majority of existing studies focus on minority children in high-risk, urban environments. While these studies provide sound evidence of violence exposure among youth in these areas, a more comprehensive, long-term analysis would provide policymakers with relevant information that can be used to develop effective prevention and intervention programs for a broader spectrum of youth in the United States. Among other benefits, analyzing youth violence exposure in different communities would foster greater insight into how such incidents affect children under various circumstances. Predictors of violence may vary greatly, even among communities that share similar characteristics. The researchers also note that the frequency, severity, and context in which the violence occurs have yet to be addressed in depth.

As well, understanding childhood exposure to violence over time is valuable. In particular, this information could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs to reduce violence and help officials determine what changes are necessary in public policy.

More information on RAND research related to children and violence: Ongoing research projects

PROJECT UNDER WAY

Youth Suicide Prevention

Suicide is one of the four leading causes of death among adolescents aged 10 to 24 years. A recent survey conducted by relevant state and federal entities estimates that each month over 8 percent of high-school age students attempt suicide.

RAND researchers, along with colleagues at UCLA and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), are evaluating the implementation of the Youth Suicide Prevention Program (YSPP) in the LAUSD, the second largest school district in the nation. The gatekeeper-model program used by the LAUSD educates school staff about how to assist students at risk of suicide and make referrals for appropriate treatment.

In an examination of YSPP records of elementary, middle, and high school students, researchers found that Latino students are the least likely to receive crisis intervention services, despite high rates of attempted suicide among Latino youths. Ongoing research will examine the factors that affect the successful implementation of the Youth Suicide Prevention Program. The findings will be used to develop more effective suicide prevention and intervention practices in the LAUSD.

For monthly email updates on all new RAND child policy publications and research projects, sign up for the Child Policy Project mailing list at www.rand.org/child/about.html.