

## A SUBMISSION BY AUARA

### About AUARA

The Australian Universities Anti-bullying Research Alliance (AUARA) is an *internationally recognised* group of educators, psychologists, academics, lawyers and researchers in the fields of aggression, bullying and school violence, and the mental health and wellbeing of young people. AUARA is a collaboration which aims to improve the outcomes of young people in Australia by leading, contributing to, and drawing from the national and international research evidence-base. AUARA's mission is to reduce the negative impacts of bullying involvement on young people.

AUARA comprises leading researchers as follows:

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The Alliance has significant international links with organisations concerned with the issues of youth wellbeing, bullying, cyberbullying, and cyber safety.

## Introduction

Bullying is a major public health problem found in most countries around the world (Craig et al., 2009). Its emergence during the school years makes it a problem for many young people over the course of their school journey. In times past, we did not pay attention to bullying thinking it just an unpleasant aspect of childhood. However, now armed with significant research we now understand the magnitude of the mental health implications should we continue to ignore it. Mental health issues both predicate and are the consequences of ALL bullying involvement. [See some recent Australian nationally representative research here: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezp01.library.qut.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1177/0004867417707819> ]

## Definition

While most young people encounter incidents in school peer groups which are conflictual in nature (e.g., mutual arguments and disagreements, not liking someone or a single act of social rejection, one-off acts of meanness or spite, isolated incidents of aggression, intimidation or violence), these *do not constitute bullying*.

Young people who are involved in bullying roles find it difficult to address it without significant external support. This is because bullying has three important and distinguishing features:

- It involves a deliberate intent to harm another
- It is repeated and ongoing
- It involves the misuse of power relationship (the person being bullied is unable to stop the bullying from happening)

## Forms

Traditional bullying occurs face-to-face (i.e., in-person) in schools and can be physical, verbal or relational (e.g., exclusion) behaviours, with the newer form of cyberbullying considered an online extension of bullying behaviours via digital/electronic devices (Smith & Slonje, 2010). Hurtful teasing is the most prevalent of all bullying behaviours experienced by students, followed by having hurtful lies told about them (Cross et al., 2009) but other serious incidents can involve invasions of privacy, theft of belongings, physical injury, stalking, harassment, rumour spreading, prank calls, threats, outing and trickery, and non-consensual sexting. There are no homogenous or neat descriptions of those who bully or those who are victimised but some at risk groups for perpetration are young people who desire social dominance, entertainment or who have negative stressors in their life and tend to come from overly harsh or authoritative families. Groups at risk of being victimised include those young people who are socially withdrawn, have internalising issues such as anxiety or depression, are obese, have disabilities that manifest in emotional or behavioural problems, who are questioning their gender identity, and those who are culturally, religiously, racially or 'any form of different' from the peer group.

## Prevalence

While they substantially co-occur, face-to-face bullying is twice as common as cyberbullying involvement (Cross et al., 2009; Modecki et al., 2014). Some relevant facts and figures sourced from National Bullying. No way! website [<https://bullyingnoway.gov.au/WhatsBullying/FactsAndFigures>] include:

- Approximately one in four Year 4 to Year 9 Australian students (27%) reported being bullied every few weeks or more often (considered to be frequent)
- Frequent school bullying is highest among Year 5 (32%) and Year 8 (29%) students.
- Peers are present as onlookers in 85% of bullying interactions, and play a central role in the bullying process.
- Online bullying appears to be related to age (or access to technology), with secondary students more likely to engage in bullying online than primary school students
- Young people over the age of 15 are less likely than students between 10 and 15 years of age to be involved in online bullying.
- Approximately one in five young people under 18 (20%) reported experiencing online bullying in any one year. The figure of 20% has been extrapolated from a number of different studies which found rates varying from 6% to 44% of students (Katz et al., 2014)
- School staff report an average of 2.1% reports per student of online bullying, with 1.2% per 100 for primary schools and 9.1% per 100 students for high schools.
- The majority (72%) of schools reported managing at least one incident of online bullying in the previous year.

## Mental health and bullying involvement

Despite cyberbullying's infamy for its association with youth suicide, all forms of bullying can be a trigger when there are mental health problems such as depression. [See research relating to this: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4090076/>].

If a young person is bullied the consequences can be:

- sadness and loneliness
- stress, depression, and anxiety
- reduced school performance and truancy
- suicidal ideation and death by suicide
- acting out and further bullying
- bringing a weapon to school (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010).

If a young person bullies others the consequences can be:

- guilt (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010),
- stress (Cross et al., 2009),
- social difficulties, depression and anxiety (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013),
- rule-breaking and aggression (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007),
- substance abuse and criminal activities (Klomek, Sourander, & Elonheimo, 2015).

For young people who witness bullying the consequences can be:

- feelings of powerlessness to stop the bullying and
- anxiety about becoming the next victim (Evans, Smokowski, Rose, Mercado, & Marshall, 2018).

Cyberbullying has been found to uniquely contribute to symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation over and above the contribution of involvement in purely traditional forms of bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013).

Models of the cost of the negative consequences of bullying run to billions of dollars, which is shared by individuals, families and the Australian community (Alannah and Madeline Foundation, 2018).

Given the prevalence of bullying involvement and the risk for negative impacts on young people while they are compelled to attend school, the facts and figures on Beyond Blue's website [<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/media/statistics>] that half of all lifelong mental health problems begin before the age of 14 years of age, does not seem all that surprising. Schools must be viewed as important places for targeting the mental health and wellbeing of young people (Spears, Taddeo, Daly, Stretton, & Karklins, 2015).

### **Views of bullying**

While schools are important contexts for addressing bullying and its impacts, this behaviour is also viewed as having a strong cultural and systemic basis related to the power dynamics inherent in all institutions – families, schools, communities, industries, and governments. For this reason, it is entirely appropriate for the Productivity Commission to consider its role in and contribution toward reducing the mental health concerns associated with bullying because of its likely impact on Australia's current and future workforce productivity.

### **Recommendations**

(1) AUARA strongly recommends the Productivity Commission consider its role in **the reduction of all forms of bullying among young people in Australia**

AUARA recommends this as a meaningful way to counter the both the short- and long-term negative impacts on future engagement in and productivity of Australia's workforce as a result of poor mental health and wellbeing.

A co-ordinated whole-of-community approach to address all forms of bullying amongst young people would serve as a gateway for Australia to access to world-leading resources, programs, research and personnel, and leverage Australia's own world-leading initiatives

Such world-leading initiatives include:

- The introduction of the Office of the e-Safety Commissioner [<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>]
- The 'Australian Student Wellbeing Framework' which is linked to school curriculum and professional school standards [<https://www.education.gov.au/national-safe-schools-framework-0>],
- and developed and developing school-based resources such as 'Friendly Schools' and the Peace Pack [<http://www.friendlyschools.com.au/research> ; <http://www.caper.com.au/pages/peacepack.htm>]

(2) In practice, this would mean **the creation of a national umbrella network organisation for social innovation**

AUARA recommends Canada's 'PREVnet' [<https://www.prevnet.ca/>] to the commission. This international initiative has achieved a 30% reduction in bullying. It is made up of research scientists, government, non-government organisations, schools and school services (e.g., school psychology and health services).

In Australia, the role and function of the new umbrella network would work to address research, education, assessment, intervention and policy. It would:

- reduce costly duplication of over-serviced areas or work to remove non-evidenced based areas of anti-bullying provision amongst young people
- would target both research and action where it is most needed amongst young people in Australia.
- inform targeted roll-out measures suitable for community- and school-level action to reduce bullying and therefore its negative associations with short and long term poor mental health, life and work outcomes.

- administer a national survey to systematically track:
    - benchmark and identify prevalence of all forms of bullying amongst school students across all schooling types, sectors, and age cohorts
    - target school interventions based on identified need versus one size fits all,
    - the provision of anti-bullying and social and emotional development support provision and monitoring systems in schools, and
    - the prevalence of bullying over time.
    - inadequately resourced schools struggling to provision bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention measures.
- (3) **Review and advocate for policy based upon existing recommendations made as a result of public consultations, government reviews, and research as it pertains to reducing bullying and its impacts.**

Existing recommendations can be sourced in these two recent reports:

- ‘Adjust our settings: A community approach to address cyberbullying among children and young people in Queensland’ [Source of report recommendations: <https://campaigns.premiers.qld.gov.au/antibullying/taskforce/assets/anti-cyberbullying-taskforce-final-report.pdf> ].
- ‘Adequacy of existing offences in the Commonwealth Criminal Code and of state and territory criminal laws to capture cyberbullying’ [Source of report recommendations: <file:///C:/Users/wdpen/Downloads/report.pdf> ]

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