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Identifying Victims of Bullying: Use of Counselor Interviews to Confirm Peer Nominations

Schools often rely on anonymous self-report methods to measure bullying victimization, but these methods prevent school personnel from identifying those students who may require support. In contrast, this study employed peer nominations to identify student victims of bullying and used school counselor interviews to confirm the students' victim status. A sample of 1,178 middle school students completed a confidential peer nomination form as part of a standard bullying survey. Students with multiple nominations were interviewed by school counselors to confirm victim status. The proportion of students confirmed as victims increased from 43% for students with two or more nominations to 90% for students with nine or more nominations.

Anonymous self-report surveys are routinely administered as a means of assessing the prevalence of bullying. A major drawback of this method is that schools may learn the prevalence of bullying, but will not know who is being bullied (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2001; Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2004; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). In principle, peer nominations can be used in conjunction with self report surveys to identify those students who are victims of bullying (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002); however, it is essential to validate peer nominations as an accurate measure of bullying victimization. The purpose of this study was to present evidence supporting the use of peer nominations by school counselors to identify victims of bullying.

A large body of evidence now shows that victims of bullying experience increased rates of many social, emotional, and academic problems. Meta-analyses of dozens of studies have found that bullying victimization is associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, psychosomatic complaints, and other internalizing problems (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). A meta-analysis of 33 studies found a consistent relationship between peer victimization and lower academic

achievement (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010).

Recent media attention to cases of bullying in school has increased pressure on school administrators to address bullying. Several court decisions (e.g., *Davis v. Monroe County*, 1999; *L.W. v. Toms River Regional Schools Board of Education*, 2007) also have held school administrators accountable for severe bullying. Currently, 45 states have anti-bullying laws (Bully Police USA, 2011). From this perspective, being able to identify victims of bullying is important for schools so that they can intervene promptly. Unfortunately, studies have consistently found that students are often reluctant to seek help for bullying and that school staff members are unlikely to detect bullying by direct observation (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Olweus & Limber, 2000; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). The primary method that schools use to assess the prevalence of bullying is an anonymous self-report survey such as the Youth Risk Behavior Scale (YRBS; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009) or the Revised Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ; Olweus, 1996). A major drawback of these surveys is that they provide no means to identify the students who self-report that they are victims of bullying. Therefore, schools need alternatives to anonymous self-report surveys that make it possible for schools to identify victims (Cornell & Mehta, 2011).

Previous studies support the validity of peer nominations for identifying students with a variety of emotional and behavioral characteristics (Clifton, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2005; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Weiss, Harris, & Catron, 2004). Peer nominations were used to measure internalizing (anxiety, depression, somatic complaints) and externalizing (aggression, delinquency) psychopathology in a sample of more than 2,000 third through sixth graders (Weiss et al., 2004). Peer reports correlated with teacher ratings on the Teacher Behavior Questionnaire (TBQ; Catron & Weiss, 1994), $r = .49$. In another study of 2,002 middle school students (Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2000), peer nominations had low correlations with teacher

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assessments of aggressive behaviors, $r = .09$ to $r = .22$. This body of evidence supports the general validity of peer nominations, but does not demonstrate that peer nominations can be used effectively by schools to identify victims of bullying.

Peer nominations of bullying victims have demonstrated convergent validity with other self-reports and teacher reports of bullying experiences. Cornell and Brockenbrough (2004) found that teacher and peer reports of bully victimization were moderately correlated ($r = .52$, $p < .001$). Pelligrini (2001) analyzed bullying and victimization among 367 sixth graders using self-reports, peer reports, direct monthly observations by trained research assistants, and student diaries. Peer nominations correlated (.21 to .32) significantly with self-report scales, diary entries and observations. These findings demonstrate that peer reports moderately agree with other informant measures. Nevertheless, current research does not provide information on the accuracy of peer nominations or how many nominations are needed to identify a victim.

One concern with both self- and peer report is that students may not understand the complex definition of bullying (e.g., Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Nansel et al., 2001). For example, the widely used definition used by Olweus (1996) stated: "Bullying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength argue or fight" (p. 9). Regardless of the situation, bullying is generally considered to involve an imbalance of power or strength between bullies and their victims (Olweus). Notably, students may over-report bullying if they fail to recognize the difference between bullying and other forms of peer conflict where there is no imbalance of power.

Research has shown that students tend to over-report victimization on self-report measures (Baly & Cornell, 2011; Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Mehta, 2011). Cornell and Mehta, for instance, investigated the accuracy of self-reports of bully victimization by having trained and experienced school counselors perform follow-up interviews with middle school students who had self-reported that they were bullied. Students were classified as either confirmed or unconfirmed victims of bullying based on the counselor's judgment and using a standard definition of bullying. Cornell and Mehta found that only 24 (56%) of 43 students who self-identified as victims were confirmed by counselors to be actual victims. Two more students (5%) had been victims of bullying prior to the 30-day timeframe of the question. Among the 17 (44%) who were not confirmed as victims, 13 (30%) were experiencing peer

conflicts that did not constitute bullying and four (9%) claimed to have marked the survey in error. This study demonstrated the potential for over-reporting in student self-reports. A comparable study is needed to investigate student nominations of their peers as victims of bullying.

Counselor judgment is not infallible and so comparisons with external criteria are needed. The Cornell and Mehta (2011) study provided a check on the validity of counselor judgments by examining the consistency of student reports to other questions about bullying in the school. Confirmed victims of bullying perceived that bullying is more pervasive and problematic in the school than unconfirmed victims. Similarly, Furlong, Chung, Bates, and Morrison (1995) found that bully victims were more likely to report a high prevalence of bullying and see school as unsafe. Finally, students nominated as victims of bullying by their peers are more likely to self-report victimization on a confidential survey (Branson & Cornell, 2009).

The present study hypothesized that the number of peer nominations a student receives would be associated with increased likelihood that the school counselor would confirm the students' victimization status. Although school counselors were not able to interview all nominated students, they were able to interview students with two, three, or more peer nominations as victims of bullying. Based on these interviews, these counselors could confirm whether or not nominated students were victims. The validity of the counselor judgments was tested by examining the answers of these students on an accompanying self-report survey.

METHOD SAMPLE

The sample was drawn from a suburban middle school in central Virginia with an annual enrollment of approximately 500 students in grades 6 through 8 with a mean age of 12.3 years ($SD = .95$). The school administered surveys each fall and spring as a routine part of its bullying prevention program. Approximately 92% of the students completed the survey each semester, omitting a few students with handicapping conditions that prevented them from reading and completing the survey as well as students who were absent during the survey time period.

In order to obtain a sufficiently large number of students identified as victims, the study sample consisted of all students who completed a survey during one or more of seven semesters (from fall 2007 to fall 2010). Only the first survey completed by a student was used. As a result, most students completed their first survey when they began attending the school in the sixth grade, but some seventh- and

eighth-grade students were already in the school at the time of the initial survey and other seventh- and eighth-grade students transferred to the school in later years. The resulting sample of 1,178 students included 58% in the sixth grade, 23% in the seventh grade, and 19% in the eighth grade. The students self-identified as 4% Asian, 18% African American, 56% European American/White, 10% Hispanic, and 12% other. Of the participants, 605 (51.4%) were boys and 573 (48.6%) girls, with mean ages of 12.27 ($SD = .96$) and 12.26 ($SD = .94$), respectively.

Measures

Self-report of bullying. The School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS; Cornell, 2011) is a 45-item self-report measure that includes a series of questions about bullying others or being bullied by others, as well as some additional questions about school climate that are not included in this study. The Olweus (1996) definition of bullying was adapted for the SCBS to use language more familiar for American students and presented at the beginning of the survey:

Bullying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength argue or fight. (p.1)

After reading the definition, students answered a series of questions about bullying using a 4-point scale (*never, once or twice, about once a week, several times per a week*). First, they responded to the statement, "By this definition, I have *been bullied* at school in the past month" (p.1). Subsequent items inquired about physical, verbal, social, and cyber types of bullying. Each type of bullying was defined as indicated in Table 1. Previous studies have supported the validity of these items by demonstrating their correspondence with independent measures of bullying from both peer and teacher nominations (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004).

Bullying prevalence items. The SCBS asks students, "Does bullying take place anywhere at school?" Students can respond either *yes* or *no* to this question. Another item states "Bullying is a problem at this school." The four response choices for this item were: *strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree*.

Peer nominations. At the end of the survey, students nominated peers whom they perceived to be victims of bullying in the previous month. In order to aid the students, the definition of bullying was repeated and they were given a roster of all students in the school. Previous studies have supported the

Table 1. Survey items

Definition and Item

Bullying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not bullying* when students of about the same strength argue or fight. By this definition, I have *been bullied* at school in the past month.

Physical Bullying involves repeatedly hitting, kicking, or shoving someone weaker on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school: I have been physically bullied or threatened with physical bullying.

Verbal Bullying involves repeatedly teasing, putting down, or insulting someone on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school: I have been verbally bullied.

Social Bullying involves getting others repeatedly to ignore or leave someone out on purpose. During the past month (30 days) at school: I have been socially bullied.

Cyber Bullying involves using the Internet (e-mail, IM, etc.) to tease or put down someone. During the past month (30 days) at school or home: I have been cyber bullied.

validity of this measure (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004). Branson and Cornell found a .32 correlation between self-reports of victimization and peer-nominated victims of bullying; a receiver operating characteristic analysis demonstrated that self-report of victimization predicted peer-nominated status with an effect size (Area Under Curve index) of .71.

School counselor interviews. Two experienced and state-licensed school counselors conducted follow-up interviews. One was 37 years old with eight years of counseling experience and the other was 46 years old with 19 years of counseling experience. Both were white. One counselor worked with all of the sixth- and half of the seventh-grade students, while the other counselor worked with the remaining half of the seventh- and all of the eighth-grade students. The counselors conducted follow-up interviews with students who received multiple peer nominations as victims. These interviews were conducted primarily as a professional school intervention rather than as a research procedure. This increased the ecological validity of the procedure, but placed some constraints on the methodology. A counselor interviewed the student nominated as a potential victim of bullying and, when identified, classmates or peers who might have witnessed or participated in the bullying.

The school counselors used interview guidelines that encouraged them to be sensitive to the possibility that a student might deny being bullied out of embarrassment or fear of retaliation. They were instructed to be persistent in their investigation until they were confident that they had an adequate

A major drawback of [self-report] surveys is that they provide no means to identify the students who self-report that they are victims of bullying.

Table 2. Identifying Victims of Bullying*Positive Predictive Value (PPV) of Peer Nominations*

Number of Nominations	<i>N</i>	Number of Confirmed Bullying Victims	PPV for Bully Victimization	Students Involved in Bullying or Peer Conflict	PPV for Students Involved in Bullying or Peer Conflict
Two or more	182	78	.429	107	.588
Three or more	117	66	.564	85	.726
Four or more	61	43	.730	50	.820
Five or more	37	27	.760	30	.811
Six or more	25	19	.760	21	.840
Seven or more	17	14	.824	16	.941
Nine or more	10	9	.900	9	.900

Note. Zero students received eight nominations.

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explanation for the peer nomination. After completing their interviews, the counselors completed a rating form based on the definition of bullying. This form required counselors to distinguish bullying from other forms of peer conflict based on the relative status or power of the two parties. They excluded isolated incidents of teasing or horseplay that were not bullying, as well as acts that occurred more than 30 days prior to the survey.

At the time of this study, the two counselors had been conducting these kinds of interviews for at least five years as part of their general work as school counselors and their leadership of school-based bullying prevention efforts in their school. Prior to data collection for this study, the authors assessed the inter-rater reliability of the two school counselors by having them independently review and classify 20 written case examples. The counselors demonstrated 100% agreement for these cases.

Procedure

An important context for this study is that it was conducted in a school that had previously implemented the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP; Olweus & Limber, 2000). The OBPP is designed to reduce bullying through interventions at the school-wide, classroom, and individual levels. As part of the program, the school adopted school-wide rules against bullying with appropriate consequences. In the classroom, teachers reinforced rules and worked to increase student knowledge and empathy regarding bullying. Counselors met with individual students identified as victims or bullies.

All students in attendance on the day of survey

administration participated in the SCBS. Students completed a paper and pencil version (fall 2007 to spring 2009) or a computer version (fall 2009 to fall 2010) of the SCBS. Because the survey was administered as a routine part of the school's bullying prevention program, active parental consent was not required. The school offered parents the option to withhold permission for their children to participate in the survey, but no parents chose to do so.

The survey was administered in classrooms during regularly scheduled advisory periods. Teachers supervised the administration and followed a standard set of instructions. For students who were absent on the survey day, an additional make-up session was arranged. School counselors reviewed the peer nomination section of the survey and counted how many nominations each student received. Consistent with previous research (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004), students with two or more nominations were interviewed by school counselors during the first two semesters of the study. In the third semester, however, the school counselors began limiting interviews to students who had three or more nominations. This change was due to workload limitations and the observation that many students with two nominations were not confirmed as victims in the previous interviews.

Survey data were sent to the researchers using code numbers rather than names to identify surveys. A single staff member at the school served as the code master who had the key linking code numbers to student names. Counselors also submitted forms with their determination of students as victims of

Table 3. Comparisons of Confirmed and Unconfirmed Victims

Item	Confirmed Victims <i>N</i>	Confirmed Victims <i>M (SD)</i>	Unconfirmed Victims <i>N</i>	Unconfirmed Victims <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
I have been bullied at school in the past month.	76	1.36 (.48)	88	1.18 (.39)	162	-2.55	.01*	.197
I have been physically bullied or threatened with physical bullying.	76	1.13 (.34)	88	1.07 (.25)	162	-1.36	.09	
I have been verbally bullied.	76	1.45 (.50)	88	1.19 (.40)	162	-3.62	.001*	.274
I have been socially bullied.	76	1.24 (.43)	87	1.08 (.27)	161	-2.81	.001*	.217
I have been cyber bullied.	76	1.07 (.25)	88	1.05 (.21)	162	-.56	.29	
Does bullying take place anywhere at school?	76	1.70 (.46)	88	1.58 (.50)	128	-.26	.39	
Bullying is a problem at this school.	57	1.54 (.50)	73	1.52 (.50)	162	-1.56	.06	

**p* < .05

bullying to the code master, who in turn replaced student names with their matching code numbers. In this way, the researchers had no means of identifying students, but could link student self-report results (which were withheld from counselors) to the counselor findings.

Data Analyses

Counselor-confirmed victims of bullying are those students who were peer-nominated as victims and identified as victims by counselors after interviewing. When counselors felt that an interviewed student was not a victim of bullying, a student was classified as an *unconfirmed* victim. The unconfirmed victims were further divided into three subgroups: (a) students who were involved in *peer conflict* that did not meet the definitional criteria for bullying because there was no power differential between the student and his or her adversary; (b) students who were *past victims* of bullying but not victims within the past 30 days; and (c) students who were not involved in any form of peer conflict or bullying and therefore classified as *nonvictims*. The latter group included students who may have been nominated as a prank or for other unknown reasons. The students who were past victims of bullying were omitted from subsequent analyses because they could be expected to have characteristics that overlapped with both victims and nonvictims.

Analyses compared confirmed victims with unconfirmed victims (classified as involved in peer conflict or nonvictims) using one-tailed *t* tests with a *p* value of .05. The groups were compared on four questions of the SCBS asking whether students had been physically, verbally, socially, or cyber bullied.

The researchers' hypothesis was that confirmed victims would self-report victimization on all four questions. Groups were then compared on the SCBS items "Does bullying take place anywhere at school?" (p. 2) and "Bullying is a problem at this school" (p. 2). The authors hypothesized that confirmed victims would report higher prevalence rates of bullying at school than unconfirmed victims.

RESULTS

As hypothesized, students with more nominations were more likely to be confirmed as victims of bullying by school counselors. The authors conducted analyses to determine the proportion of students confirmed as victims for each level of peer nominations (two or more, three or more, four or more, five or more, etc.). As reported in Table 2, the PPV rose from 43% for those students with two or more peer nominations to 90% for those with nine or more nominations. Students confirmed as victims had an average of 5.51 nominations (*SD* = 6.58) versus 2.86 nominations (*SD* = 1.32) for unconfirmed victims, $t(164) = -3.70$, *p* = .00, *d* = -.56.

A follow-up analysis combined the category of confirmed victims with students who were identified as involved in a peer conflict that was not bullying, because both groups would be of interest to school counselors. As noted in Table 2, the PPV results for the combined group are substantially higher. Approximately 59% of students receiving two or more nominations, 73% with three or more nominations, and 82% with four or more nominations were identified by school counselors as involved in either bullying or some other form of peer conflict.

Counselors conducted follow-up interviews with students who received multiple peer nominations as victims.

An important context for this study is that it was conducted in a school that had previously implemented the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program.

As reported in Table 3, confirmed victims were more likely to self-report being a victim of bullying than unconfirmed victims (students classified by counselors as either nonvictims or involved in peer conflict that was not bullying), $t(162) = -2.55$, $p = .01$. Confirmed victims were significantly more likely than unconfirmed victims to endorse being verbally and socially bullied ($t(162) = -1.36$, $p = .00$, and $t(161) = -2.81$, $p = .00$, respectively). The two groups did not differ significantly in their reports of being physically bullied, $t(162) = -1.36$, $p = .09$, or cyber bullied, $t(162) = -.57$, $p = .29$. Holm's (1979) sequential Bonferroni adjustment was used to adjust the family wise alpha levels for the seven t tests. This resulted in no change in the pattern of significant findings at the .05 level.

Confirmed victims did not differ significantly from unconfirmed victims in answering the SCBS item "Does bullying take place anywhere at school?" ($t(128) = -.26$, $p = .40$). Furthermore, the two groups did not differ significantly in answers to the item "Bullying is a problem at this school" ($t(162) = -1.56$, $p = .06$).

DISCUSSION

Results from this study provide new tentative evidence that peer nominations can be used to identify victims of bullying. Previous studies have used peer nominations as a method for identifying students who are victims of bullying (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Chan, 2006; Chan, Myron, & Crawshaw, 2005) but have not examined how many nominations are needed to confirm that a student is an actual victim of bullying. This study made use of counselor interviews to confirm or disconfirm the peer nomination results and in this way was able to assess the positive predictive value of having two or more peer nominations. Previous studies (Branson & Cornell; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004) suggested that two or three peer nominations could be used to identify victims of bullying, but the present study found that only 43% of students with two nominations and 56% of those with three nominations were confirmed by counselors as victims of bullying. At four nominations, the confirmation rate was notably higher at 73%.

Another consideration in the use of peer nominations is that students may identify peers who are embroiled in a peer conflict that is not bullying but is still worthy of investigation and intervention. When the category of confirmed victims of bullying was expanded to include other forms of peer conflict in which no power imbalance existed between antagonists, the positive predictive value results were substantially higher. The majority (59%) of students with two or more nominations and nearly three-

quarters (73%) of those with three or more nominations were identified by counselors as involved in some form of peer conflict.

Previous studies have used peer nominations on the classroom level, typically in elementary schools where children are in the same classroom for a majority of the day (Chan, 2006; Chan, Myron, & Crawshaw, 2005). In secondary schools, such as the middle school used in this study, students change classes throughout the day and interact with a much larger group of students. A survey limited to classmates would be too narrow, because so much bullying takes place in buses, playgrounds, cafeterias, and other areas outside of class. A student might be in a class with no one who knows about the bullying he or she is experiencing outside of the classroom. A school-wide assessment can capture bullying that might be overlooked in traditional classroom-based assessments.

This study relied on counselor judgments about whether a student was bullied. Student self-reports were used as an external criterion to check counselor judgments, although the authors note that students are not an infallible criterion, either. Nevertheless, follow-up analyses comparing differences between confirmed and unconfirmed victims provide some support for the validity of counselor judgments. As expected, confirmed victims were more likely than unconfirmed victims to report being victims of general, verbal, and social bullying. Reports of physical and cyber bullying did not significantly differ between the two groups. Perhaps these differences were not significant because physical and cyber bullying were the least frequent forms of bullying reported and rates were low for all students. Additionally, the two groups did not differ in their perceptions of the prevalence or seriousness of bullying. It may be useful for future studies to examine additional criteria for confirming that a student is truly a victim of bullying.

The measurement of bullying victimization presents some challenges because many students who are nominated as victims were not found by counselors to be victims. Students, whether reporting via self-report or peer nomination, may inflate reports of bullying if they fail to distinguish it from other forms of peer conflict (Cornell & Mehta, 2011). They may also inflate bullying rates if they give frivolous answers about themselves or their classmates. Future studies should investigate the factors that might inflate (or deflate) prevalence rates using self and peer reports. Baly and Cornell (2011) demonstrated that students who watched an educational video about bullying prior to taking a self-report survey would be less likely to report some types of bullying. Perhaps educational efforts both about the concept of bullying and the importance of taking the

survey seriously will produce more accurate results. Increased efforts to educate students regarding the definition of bullying may improve the accuracy of student reports. The use of multiple informants, such as a peer nomination form in addition to the use of a self-report survey, may also help gauge the level of student understanding of the bullying definition by observing any significant differences between self reports and peer nominations. Students who fail to self-report victimization, but are peer nominated, may have an unclear understanding of the bullying definition or may not be able to look objectively at their own situation.

Peer nominations offer some important advantages over self-report methods. First of all, a student is identified by multiple informants rather than a single self-report. Multiple informants should in principle produce more reliable and valid results, except perhaps in the unusual case that a victim is being bullied secretly and peers are not aware of it. A second important advantage is that victims are identified by name with peer nominations so that they can be interviewed by counselors. As a result, school authorities are able to identify victims and intervene more promptly with peer nominations than if they only have anonymous self-reports. Even in those cases where a nominated student is not a victim of bullying, a peer conflict may merit school counseling attention.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

The school counselors were not able to interview all students in the school, so some victims of bullying may not have been detected by the peer nomination process. A related consequence of this design limitation is that calculating the negative predictive power (accuracy of not being nominated) of the peer nominations was not possible.

Another limitation was that not all students with two nominations were interviewed by counselors. In the first two waves of surveying, all students with two or more nominations were interviewed, but the counselors limited their interviews to students with three or more nominations in subsequent semesters. This unanticipated change in study design reflects a common practical problem in schools, which is that limited resources make it difficult to provide services to every student in need of counseling. However, pressure is increasing on schools to respond to the problem of bullying, and anonymous self-report surveys will not give school counselors the information they need to take action. The results of this study suggest that peer nominations might be an effective screening procedure to identify victims of bullying, recognizing that the students with the greatest num-

ber of nominations are most likely to be confirmed as victims. Future research may be able to determine whether students with the greatest number of nominations are experiencing the most severe form of bullying or are identified for other reasons, such as the student's popularity or a highly visible location for the bullying.

Some students may have been nominated as a prank or for other unknown reasons by their classmates. The school where this study took place has an established bullying prevention program (the OBPP) and the students should have taken the survey seriously due to this exposure to anti-bullying efforts. Future studies could determine what level of inappropriate or prank responding is typical across schools (as well as gender and grade levels) and what factors might be associated with higher levels of serious survey completion.

Students may be reluctant to inform on their peers because of the social stigma associated with being labeled a snitch (Oliver & Candappa, 2007). This study asked students to report the names of victims rather than bullies in part because of this concern. Several studies have suggested that improvements in school climate and teacher support for students could increase student willingness to seek help for bullying (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010). Student education on the value and outcomes of peer nominations may be helpful in encouraging students to use this method appropriately.

Recommendations for Counselors

School counselors can be a valuable resource in identifying and aiding victims of bullying. Research indicates that those counselors who have undergone specific training programs on bullying are most effective in bullying prevention (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). The counselors in this study, who had been participating in a school-wide bullying prevention program for some time, were effective in identifying students who were likely to be involved in peer conflict or were victims of bullying. In addition to information from school-wide surveys, counselors have valuable information via their daily interactions with students that may help them discern whether a student is answering truthfully about their peer interactions during their post-survey interviews.

Counselors should take care when approaching students to discuss the peer nominations so that the students are not embarrassed. In this school, students are routinely called to the counseling office to discuss neutral topics such as class schedules and extra-curricular activities, in addition to more problematic behavioral or academic issues. The counselors and teachers never announce to other students why a particular student may be leaving the classroom to go to the counseling office.

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When conducting interviews with nominated students, counselors should not assume that a nominated student is necessarily a victim. As these results indicate, some students may be nominated for other reasons, such as a prank or previous victimization experience. The inquiry into the student's experience of bullying needs to be approached in a sensitive and careful manner. In this study, counselors reported routinely reminding the student about the survey and discussing bullying in broad terms. After reviewing the definition and types of bullying, the student was asked about his or her own experiences with bullying. While some students readily acknowledged their victimization, other students were less forthcoming. In those instances, counselors would remind the students of the peer nominations at the end of the survey, reveal that the student had been nominated, and inquire as to why his or her peers may have done so.

For those students who appear surprised or concerned about their nominations, counselors should approach the topic in a neutral and matter-of-fact manner that conveys no sense of stigma or disrespect in being bullied. Students may deny being bullied because of embarrassment or fear of retaliation by the bully. Or they may be afraid of being considered a snitch if they admit what happened.

Counselors are encouraged to use peer nominations as an additional screening tool to identify suspected victims of bullying, who may or may not self-report victimization on school surveys. The use of peer nomination-cut off points allows counselors to identify the students who are most likely to be victims. From a practical standpoint, school counselors must decide how many students to interview based on considerations such as the time they have available to devote to a screening procedure. They also might find that peer nominations can be used in combination with other sources of information to identify students who are most at-risk for bullying.

Although some interviewees may not be victims of bullying, they may be experiencing conflicts that are serious enough to be of concern to their peers. This makes peer nominations a potentially valuable tool for identifying student conflicts before they escalate into bullying. A substantial body of evidence indicates that school-based interventions, using behavioral, cognitive, or social skills approaches, can reduce and prevent aggressive behavior and school counselors are encouraged to utilize these approaches when intervening in school bullying (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Peer nominations offer a promising strategy for schools to use in meeting the need to identify vic-

tims of bullying. They can be used to supplement other measures and offer the advantage of giving school staff names for follow-up interviews and more direct interventions. The current study identified some limitations as well as strengths of the peer nomination method and suggested some directions for future study, including more research on efficient cut-off points and strategies to improve student accuracy and honesty in identifying victims of bullying. ■

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Victims are identified by name with peer nominations so that they can be interviewed by counselors. As a result, school authorities are able to identify victims and intervene more promptly with peer nominations

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