

Meta-Analysis: The Effectiveness of Anti-Bullying Programs

The 2005 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey reported that about 14% of teens between the ages of 12 and 18 had been bullied in the past six months. The effects of bullying are numerous and include perceived fear, behavior problems, negative consequences for school performance, depression, and other physical ailments. There have been many different programs designed to decrease bullying in schools, but the effectiveness of these programs remains largely unknown. To examine the effects of anti-bullying programs across studies, Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, Sanchez, and Sanchez (2007) performed a meta-analysis of randomized experimental studies examining the efficacy of such programs.

Studies included in the Ferguson et al. (2007) meta-analysis had several selection criteria: (a) They had to be published between 1995 and 2006, (b) the outcome variables had to clearly measure some element of bullying behavior toward peers, (c) they had to involve some form of control group to test program effectiveness, (d) the intervention programs had to be school based, and (e) only manuscripts published in peer-reviewed journals were included. Results of the meta-analysis indicated that the impact of anti-bullying programs ranged from less than 1% for low-risk children to 3.6% for high-risk children. Ferguson and his colleagues (2007) stated, “Thus, it can be said that although anti-bullying programs produce a small amount of positive change, it is likely that this change is too small to be practically significant or noticeable” (p. 408).

Meta-analyses such as this make us aware of how hazardous it is to base understanding of social processes on single studies that are limited in time, location, and measurement. Of course, we need to have our wits about us when we read reports of meta-analytic studies. It is not a good idea to assume that a meta-analysis is the definitive word on a research question just because it cumulates the results of multiple studies.