

Anti-bullying laws in 25 states: What is effective?



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Bullying is associated with poor school performance, depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviors and aggression towards others. This brief will evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying laws in reducing the risk of being bullied in 25 states in the U.S. Our study was the largest and most comprehensive evaluation of these laws.

Key Findings

- ◆ Anti-bullying laws that complied with guidelines recommended by the Department of Education (DOE) were associated with less bullying and cyberbullying among high school students.
- ◆ Three DOE recommendations were associated with lower levels of bullying and cyberbullying: having a statement of scope, a description of prohibited behaviors, and requirements for school districts to develop and implement local policies.
- ◆ Anti-bullying laws cannot completely stop bullying, but our study suggests that such laws may be important for a comprehensive bullying prevention strategy.

Bullying is peer-on-peer aggressive behavior that occurs repeatedly over time and arises from a power imbalance.

Bullying is common.

Bullying is the most common form of youth violence. The national 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS) showed that 20% of high school youth were bullied at school in the last year. Across the 25 states in our study, there was a substantial difference in bullying and cyberbullying, from a low (14%) in Alabama to a high (27%) in South Dakota (average 20%). In Iowa, 22% of high school students were bullied.

Anti-bullying laws increased in the U.S.

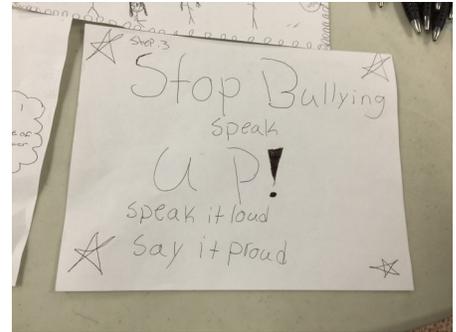
Between 1999 and 2010, anti-bullying policies increased in the U.S. All 50 states in the U.S. now have an anti-bullying law. These laws vary in their requirements and recommendations, and little is known about their effectiveness in reducing bullying.

The DOE established a recommended framework for anti-bullying laws that it disseminated to schools across the country. In 2011, the DOE commissioned a review of such laws, assigning compliance scores for each of 16 components organized into the following four broad categories: definitions of the policy, district policy development and review, mandated procedures, and strategies for communication, training, and legal support. However, it was unknown whether laws compliant with the DOE framework were effective in reducing bullying, or which specific legal components were most effective in reducing bullying. The DOE also found substantial diversity in state adoption of their recommendations.



DOE anti-bullying policies = less reported bullying

We examined the association between anti-bullying policies and being bullied, using the 2011 YRBSS survey of over 63,000 9-12th graders in 25 states. Students in states with at least one DOE legislative component in the anti-bullying law were **24% less likely to report bullying** and **20% less likely to report cyberbullying** compared with students in states whose laws had no DOE legislative components. This was regardless of the state's violent crime rate and culture of permissiveness towards deviance.



Three components of anti-bullying laws are working.

Some components of anti-bullying laws were consistently associated with lower levels of bullying and cyberbullying.

- ⇒ First, there is a statement of scope, which describes where the law applies and the circumstances under which the school has the authority to take action (e.g., whether the law applies if students are off-campus but if the event is sponsored by the school).
- ⇒ Second, there is a description of prohibited behaviors that are considered bullying. In some cases, it specifies what may be appropriate teasing, and in others that the behavior must be repeated.
- ⇒ Third, there are requirements for school districts to develop and implement local policies, dictate the components that must be included in local policies, and may set a timeline in which the local policy must be developed.

Statement of scope

Description of prohibited behaviors

Requirements for implementing policies

Next Steps

In the 25 states, these three legislative components offer details and clarity for school administrators, and may empower them. However, we were unable to uncover why these components were effective or identify what combination of components was the most effective. A recent study found that public school administrators in Iowa could benefit from additional clarity on cyberbullying prevention strategies.² Current research funded by the CDC is underway to further examine state anti-bullying laws over an 18-year period to determine whether they are effective in reducing multiple forms of youth violence among youth including fights, assaults, and weapon carrying. This research will be the most comprehensive evaluation of such laws to date and will help identify which laws and implementation practices are the most effective. This research will also determine whether anti-bullying laws are effective in reducing group-based disparities in youth violence (e.g., disparities related to sex, weight and sexual orientation). Recent research by our team found that anti-bullying laws may need to be refined to protect youth who are vulnerable to bullying victimization.³

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Reference (1) Hatzenbuehler ML, Schwab-reese L, Ranapurwala SI, Hertz MF, Ramirez MR. Associations Between Antibullying Policies and Bullying in 25 States. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2015;169(10):e152411.

Reference (2) Young R, Tully M, Ramirez M. School Administrator Perceptions of Cyberbullying Facilitators and Barriers to Preventive Action: A Qualitative Study. *Health Educ Behav.* 2017;44(3):476-484.

Reference (3) Hatzenbuehler ML, Flores JE, Cavanaugh JE, Onwuachi-willig A, Ramirez MR. Anti-bullying Policies and Disparities in Bullying: A State-Level Analysis. *Am J Prev Med.* 2017;53(2):184-191.