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HBSC is the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study

Bullying and fighting among schoolchildren in Scotland: age and gender patterns, trends and cross-national comparisons

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Introduction

Aggression in schools, in the form of bullying and fighting among pupils, is a problem in many countries around the world. This paper, produced jointly by the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit (CAHRU) and the Anti-Bullying Network (ABN), both based at the University of Edinburgh, looks at the extent of bullying and fighting among school pupils and provides a reflection on these findings by experts in bullying prevention and intervention.

Being bullied can have an effect on a child's present and future health and well-being¹⁻⁴. School is only one place where bullying occurs, but it is a context where adults and other pupils can show that bullying is unacceptable. Schools in Scotland are now encouraged by HM Inspectorate of Education and by local authorities to become aware of and to tackle bullying⁵. A formal anti-bullying policy will be found in most schools, but such a policy has to be more than paper to be effective. One approach is to try to build up a positive school ethos, as preventive of bullying and aggression amongst pupils^{6,7}. Given efforts made within education over the past ten years, and indeed publicity in the media for the most tragic outcomes of bullying, pupils, teachers and parents should be able to recognise that bullying is not trivial and is not an inevitable part of childhood. Being bullied does not 'toughen up' a child, nor should it be part of everyday life at school.

There is a wide range of possible bullying behaviours, from physical attack to name-calling, from isolation of the bullied child to a threatening look, from individual to group bullying to anonymous bullying by text message. Furthermore, the effects of being bullied on an individual are unpredictable. Some people suffer serious lasting consequences and may become suicidal while for others the effects are transitory. The seriousness of bullying cannot be judged by what is observed. Verbal and psychological bullying may be just as damaging as physical bullying.

This paper provides an up-to-date overview of the extent of bullying in Scottish primary and secondary schools using findings from the 2001/02 Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC):

Main findings

- ~ A higher percentage of boys than girls report that they have bullied others while reports of being bullied are the same for both genders
- ~ Around 1 in 12 pupils say they have been bullied, and around 1 in 20 say they have bullied others, at a frequency of at least four times in the past two months
- ~ Reports of being bullied have declined between 1994 and 2002.
- ~ Fighting is more commonly reported by boys than by girls
- ~ Around 1 in 7 pupils say they have been in a fight three times or more in the past year
- ~ Scotland has a relatively low rate of bullying but a relatively high rate of fighting when compared cross-nationally

WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study^{8,9}. The proportions of pupils that report bullying, being bullied, and being involved in fights are presented and gender patterns and differences between age groups are examined. Using data from earlier HBSC surveys, some trends in bullying are also presented, as are cross-national comparisons using the 2001/02 international survey data.

Details of the 2001/02 Survey

The 2001/02 HBSC survey was conducted in 35 countries in Europe and North America. National samples of 11, 13 and 15 year olds were drawn in accordance with the Study protocol. Across countries, surveys were conducted mainly between the autumn of 2001 and the spring of 2002. Approximately 1,500 respondents in each age group were targeted in every country.

Data were collected by self-administered questionnaire. On completion of fieldwork, national data files were prepared using standard documentation and submitted to the HBSC International Data Bank at the University of Bergen, Norway. Data files were

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checked, cleaned and returned to countries for approval prior to their placement in the international file. Further details can be found in *Young People's Health in Context*.⁹

The sample in Scotland was nationally representative, drawn from mixed ability classes in both state and independent schools, and yielded usable data from 4,404 young people in Primary 7 (1,743 eleven year olds), Secondary 2 (1,512 thirteen year olds) and Secondary 4 (1,149 fifteen year olds).

Statistics

When the difference between two percentages is significant, asterisks are used in the text to denote the level of statistical significance as follows:

- * p < 0.05 significant difference,
- ** p < 0.01 highly significant difference,
- *** p < 0.001 very highly significant difference

Bullying

Pupils may take different meaning from the word 'bullying', given that it covers so many different behaviours. In the survey questionnaire a standard definition of being bullied/bullying was used¹⁰. This was:

'We say a pupil is BEING BULLIED when another pupil, or a group of pupils, say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a pupil is teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like or when they are deliberately left out of things.'

'It is NOT BULLYING when two pupils of about the same strength or power argue or fight. It is also not bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly or playful way.'

This definition contains common themes relating to bullying, that is: *bullying can take different forms; there is an imbalance of power in the bullying situation, which implies that one of the parties has difficulty in defending him/herself; bullying is a repeated action.*

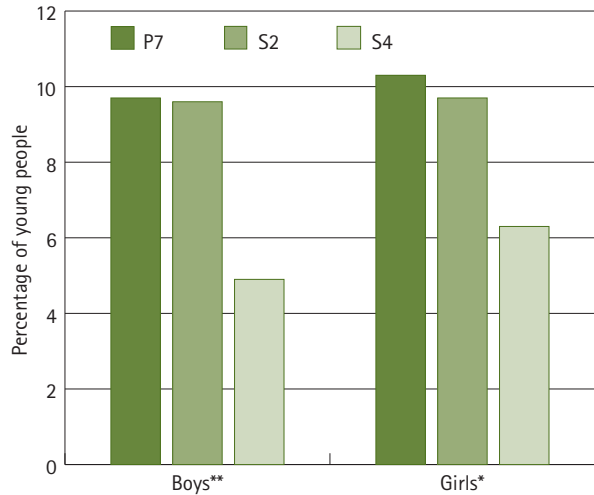
Having been given the definition of bullying, the pupils were asked 'How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?' They had a choice of five responses: I haven't been bullied at school in the past couple of months/It has only happened once or twice/2 or 3 times a month/About once a week/Several times a week. Responses in the last three of these categories were combined into a 'bullied 2 or 3 times a month or more often' or 'victim' category. This is a standard and acceptable way of classifying bullying behaviour that would not include one-off incidents¹¹.

Being bullied

About one in twelve pupils overall (8.4%) reported that they had been a victim of regular bullying. There was a highly significant age difference (***) in the responses with one in ten (10%) of the 11-year-old pupils reporting being bullied compared with approximately one in twenty (5.6%) of the 15-year-olds. No significant gender

difference was found in reports of being bullied. Figure 1 below shows the age differences by gender in being bullied.

Figure 1: Age differences in being bullied

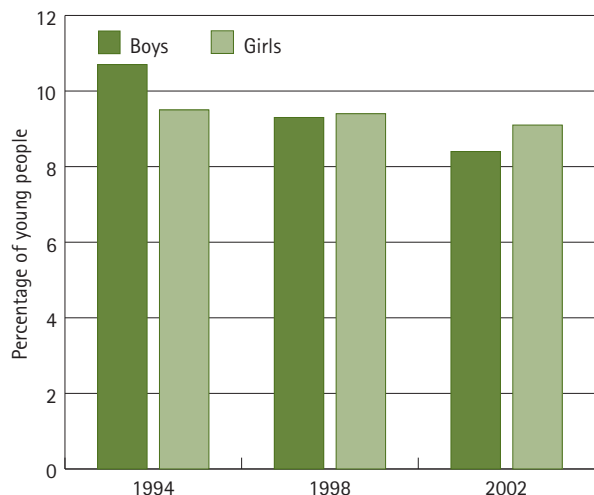


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The decrease in pupils reporting being bullied occurs principally within the secondary school, between the 13-year-old/S2 pupils and the 15-year-old /S4 pupils, and is greater for boys than for girls. It might be that physical and psychological maturation make S4 boys and girls less likely targets. It might also be the case that older boys, in particular, are more embarrassed or ashamed of being bullied and thus more likely to under-report, even in a confidential questionnaire. Research in Australia has found that children as they grow older feel increasingly embarrassed about reporting their experiences of bullying¹².

The question about being bullied was also asked in the 1994 and 1998 surveys in Scotland (see Fig 2 below). The data show that for

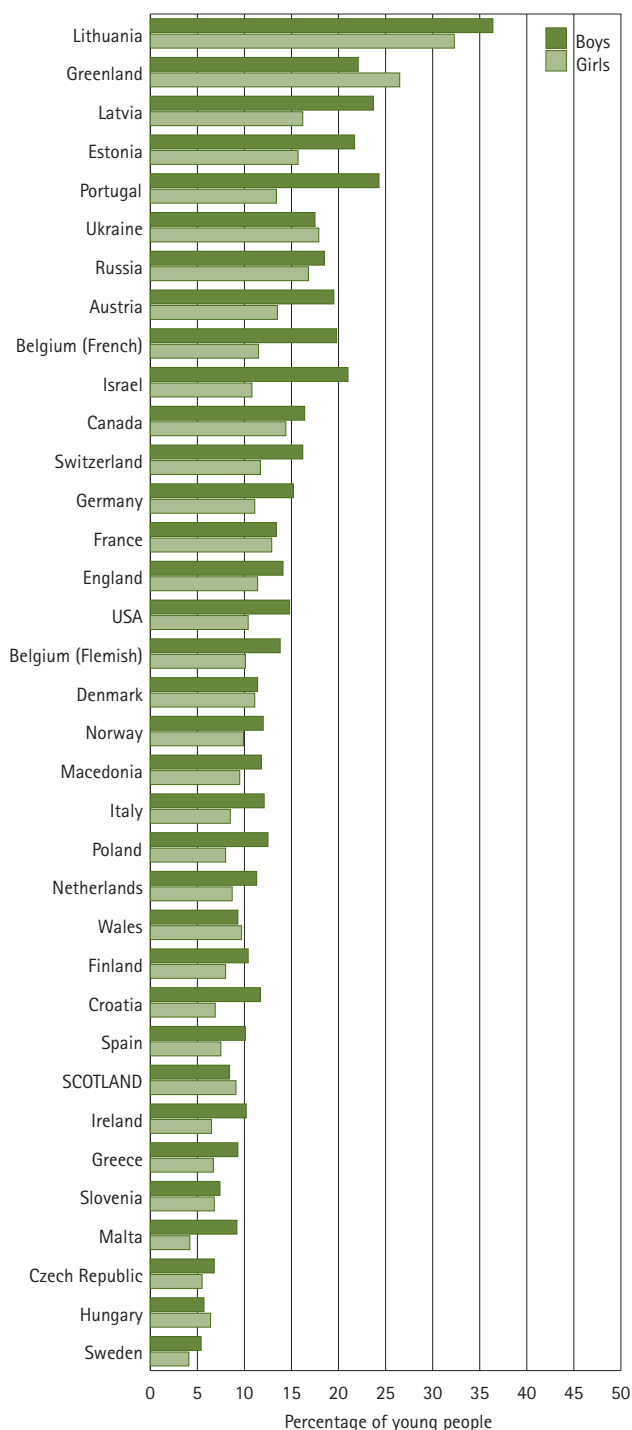
Figure 2: Trends in reporting of being bullied



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each succeeding survey, the percentage of boys overall reporting being bullied decreased. In 1994 it was 10.7%, in 1998 it was 9.3% and in 2002 it was 8.3%. The decrease from 1994 to 2002 among boys is statistically significant (**); no significant decrease in being bullied was found for girls. The figures may reflect a focus in schools on dealing with visible, physical bullying, which is more

Figure 3: Cross-national comparisons in reports of being bullied at least 2 times a month in the previous 2 months (11, 13 & 15 year olds)



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common among boys than girls^{13,14}. It may also, in part, be attributable to an increased awareness of the effects of bullying and to work aimed at reducing the incidence of bullying in schools¹⁵.

Cross-national comparisons from the 2001/02 HBSC survey show that reported victimisation in Scotland is lower than in many other countries in Europe and in North America⁹. Combining the three age groups and both genders, Scotland ranks 28th out of 35 countries. Pupils from England and Wales rank higher, at 15th and 24th, while pupils from Ireland report almost identical levels of being bullied to Scotland (Figure 3). Reported victimisation among boys in Scotland ranks lower cross-nationally than among the girls: 31st out of 35 countries as compared with 22nd for the girls.

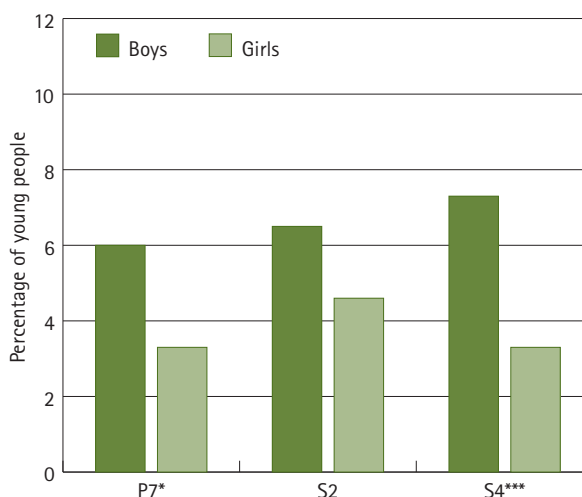
In Figure 3, countries are presented in descending order of prevalence for boys and girls combined. The ranking of countries should be interpreted with some caution, as countries close in rank may not be statistically different.

Bullying others

In surveys of bullying it is generally found that there are more children who report being bullied than there are self-reported bullies¹⁶. This survey was no exception. One in twelve (8.4%) pupils reported being bullied while one in twenty (5.2%) reported bullying others. Again, there were five possible responses to the question "How often have you taken part in bullying another pupil(s) at school in the past few months?" In the same standard way as with the bullied pupils' replies, three of these categories were amalgamated into one 'bully' category representing those who report bullying others at least 2 or 3 times a month.

There was a highly significant (***) gender difference in the pupils' responses. Reported bullying by boys (6.6%) was almost twice that by girls (3.7%). This difference was greatest among 15 year olds, where reported bullying by boys (7.3%) was more than double that of girls (3.3%), as Figure 4 shows. No significant age

Figure 4: Gender differences in reporting of bullying others



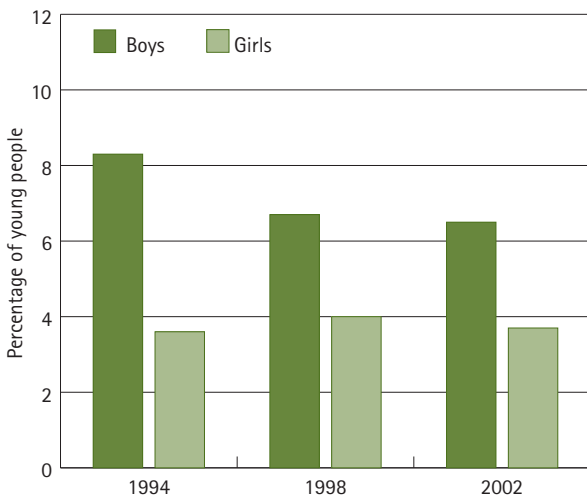
Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National 2001/02 Survey

difference in reported bullying was found for either boys or girls.

There are several possible interpretations of the findings in Figure 4. Girls may indeed less commonly bully others¹⁶; alternatively they are perhaps reluctant to admit to being a bully, knowing that it is socially unacceptable behaviour¹⁷. It may also be that girls are more likely to bully as part of a group^{18,19} and perhaps therefore absolve themselves from being the 'real' bully.

The same question about bullying others was asked in the 1994 and 1998 surveys. Figure 5 shows that reported bullying among girls remained at an unchanged low level across survey years but that reported bullying among boys decreased significantly (*) between 1994 and 1998 and thereafter changed little. As with being bullied, a decrease in the prevalence of bullying since 1994 is found for boys but not for girls.

Figure 5: Trends in reporting of bullying others



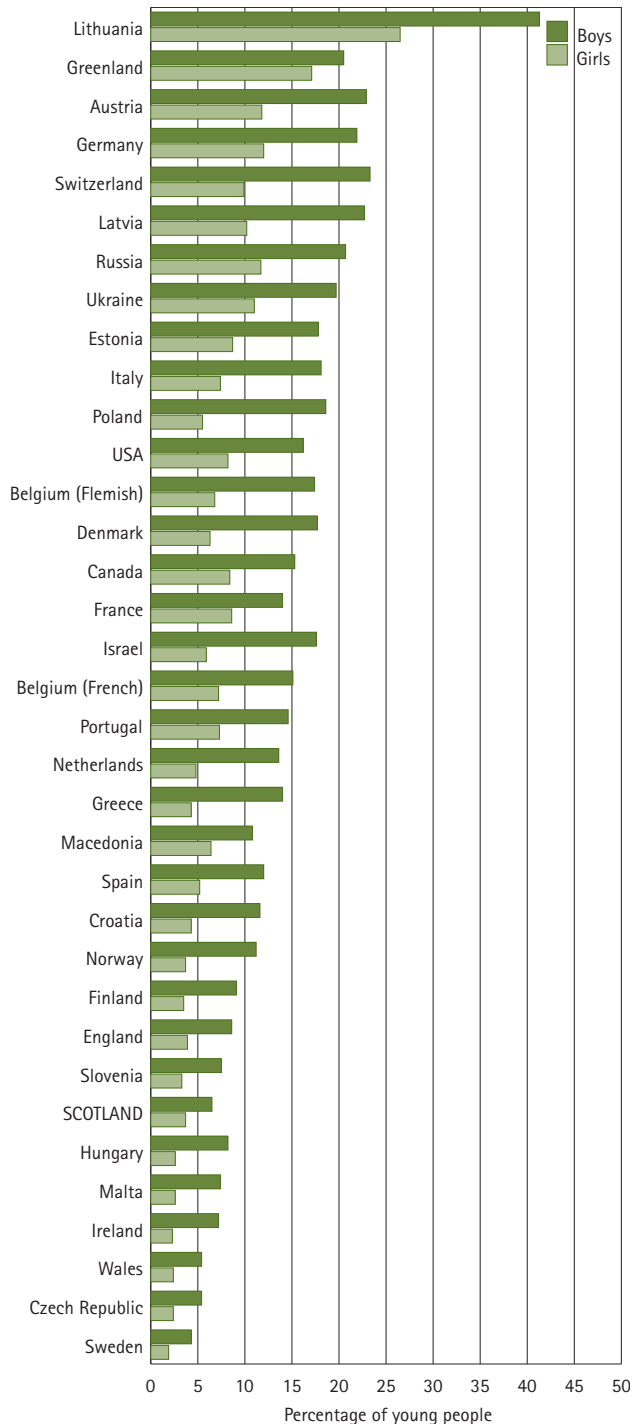
Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National 2001/02 Survey

Cross-nationally Scotland also ranks low for reported bullying compared with other European countries and North America. Combining the three age groups and both genders, Scotland ranks 29th out of 35 countries. Reported bullying in England, Ireland and Wales is similarly low compared with other countries, at 27th, 32nd and 33rd respectively (Figure 6). As with being bullied, reported bullying among boys in Scotland ranks lower (32nd) cross-nationally than among the girls (26th).

Fighting

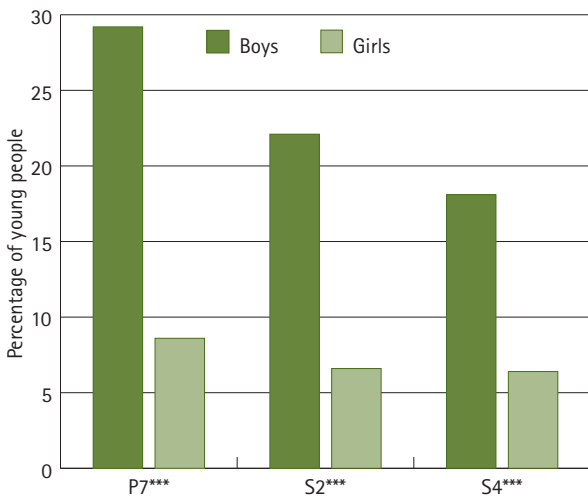
Fighting was a new topic in the 2002 HBSC survey in Scotland. Although bullying can include physical aggression, fighting is not necessarily bullying. Involvement in physical fighting is not only symptomatic of interpersonal violence but also can be indicative of an individual engaging in other high-risk behaviours²⁰. Fighting was not defined in the survey question nor was it restricted to fighting in school. The question measuring frequency of fighting

Figure 6: Cross-national comparisons in reports of bullying others at least 2 times a month in the previous 2 months (11, 13 & 15 year olds)



Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National 2001/02 Survey (countries ranked in descending order of prevalence for boys and girls combined)

Figure 7: Age and gender differences in reported fighting (3 or more times in past year)



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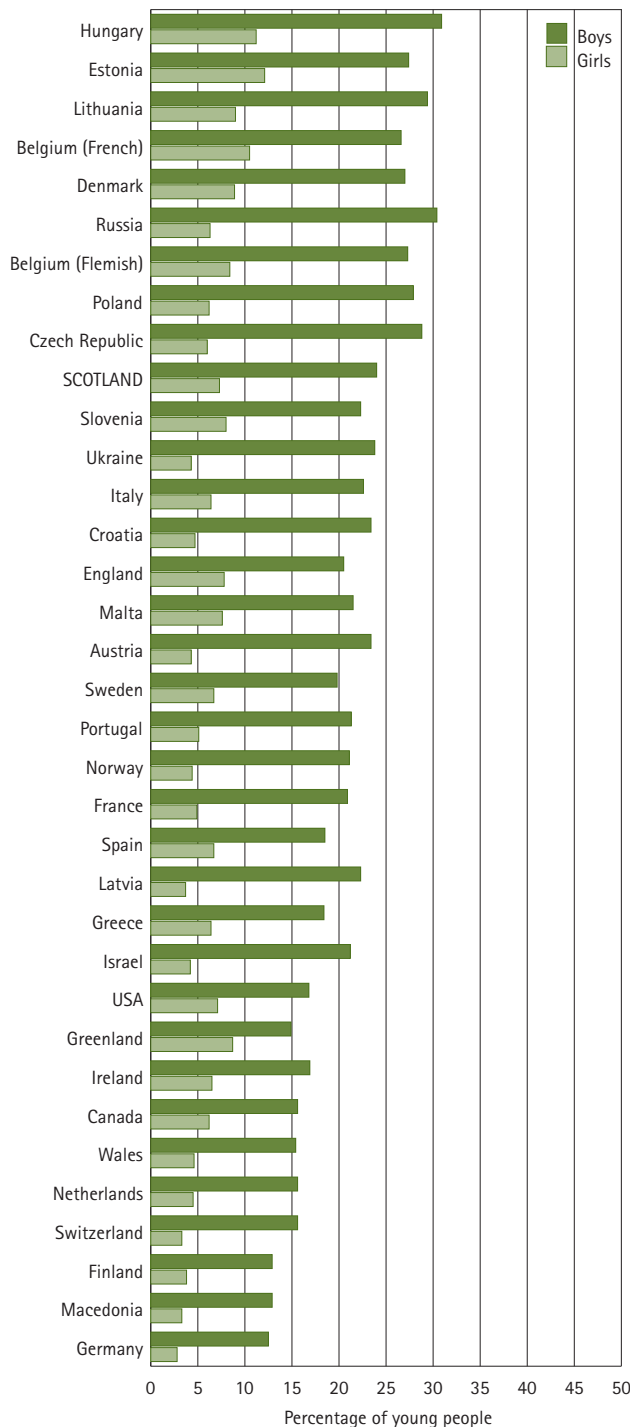
has been used frequently in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behaviour Survey in the USA where its validity and reliability has been established. Pupils were simply asked: 'During the last 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight?' The response categories were: I have not been in a physical fight/ 1 time/2 times/3 times/4 or more times. Figure 7 shows those pupils who reported being involved in fighting three times or more in the past year.

Taking all ages together, approximately one in seven (15.4%) young people reported being in a fight 3 or more times in the past year. There was a highly significant (***) gender difference in reported fighting with approximately three times more boys (23.3%) than girls (7.2%) being involved. There was also a highly significant (***) decrease with age in reported fighting from 19.6% at age 11 to 12.3% at age 15. The majority of this decrease occurs between Primary 7 and Secondary 2 and is due to the decline in reported fighting by boys; there was no significant age difference among girls.

Cross-national comparisons show that reported fighting in Scotland is high compared with other countries in Europe and in North America. Combining the three age groups and both genders Scotland ranks 10th out of 35 countries. England, Ireland and Wales ranked lower than Scotland at 15th, 28th and 30th respectively. Unlike bullying and victimisation, Scottish boys and girls have similar rankings cross-nationally in comparison with their peers in other countries (Boys: 10th; girls: 11th).

It is unclear why Scotland should rank higher cross-nationally in relation to fighting but not bullying. While there has been a focus on school bullying in Scotland at a national and local level in the last 15 years, fighting has received less attention. It seems reasonable to suggest that this is an area worthy of further study.

Figure 8: Cross-national comparisons in reports of fighting 3 or more times in past year (11,13 & 15 year olds)



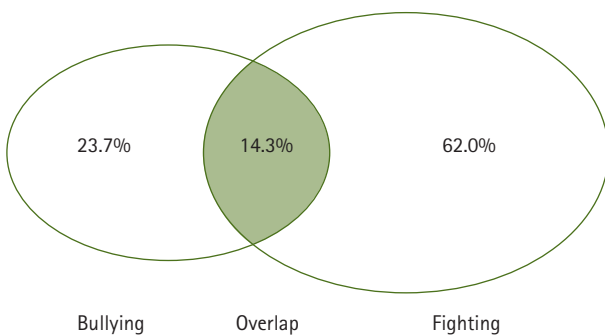
Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National 2001/02 Survey (countries ranked in descending order of prevalence for boys and girls combined)

The overlap between fighting, being bullied and bullying others

It is interesting to examine the overlap between bullying and fighting behaviour among 11–15 year olds. Two thirds (66.5%) of the pupils have not been involved in any of the three behaviours on a regular basis, that is, been bullied or bullied others at least 2 or 3 times a month in the previous couple of months or been in a physical fight at least 3 times in the previous 12 months.

Figure 9 shows the behaviour reported by the remaining third of pupils. It can be seen that the overlap between fighting and bullying behaviour is comparatively small (14.4%) and that those involved in only fighting (62%) and those involved in only bullying (as a perpetrator or a victim) (23.7%) constitute two discrete groups. It is acknowledged that bullying is different from conflict, in that it is based on an imbalance of power, but the discovery of two distinct groups of pupils in relation to these behaviours is unexpected. The characteristics of the two groups, those only involved in fighting and those only involved in bullying, need to be explored further to understand the differences, be they sociological, psychological or environmental.

Figure 9: The overlap between bullying and fighting (among those involved in either or both)



Examination of the international bullying and fighting data shows that the above phenomenon is not unique to Scotland. Combining all countries and age groups 68% are not involved in either bullying or fighting regularly. Of the 32% that are involved, 41.2% report only fighting, 35.4% report only bullying or being bullied and the overlap between the behaviours applies to 23.4%. The two distinct groups are of a more similar size than is found in Scotland but the overlap is still not great at less than 25%.

Final points

The results from these surveys are self-reported and descriptive. Nevertheless, they raise a number of questions for teachers and parents, and for pupils. These are:

- How can the climate of concern about school bullying be extended to include other aggressive behaviours such as fighting, and to encompass the wider community beyond the school?
- Do the findings of this report suggest that schools, and other young people's organisations, need to put more effort into the development of conflict resolution strategies?
- Should further research be undertaken to investigate the nature and pattern of fighting among young people in Scotland and how this relates to other concerns about racism, sexism and gangs?
- How can schools make progress in reducing the less visible types of bullying?

Summary of HBSC findings on bullying and fighting

- Approximately one in twelve pupils (8.4%) reported that they had been bullied at school at least 2 times a month in the previous couple of months
- Reports of being bullied were highest among P7 pupils (1 in 10) and lowest among S4 pupils (1 in 20)
- Reports by boys of being bullied decreased between 1994 and 2002 in Scotland
- Approximately one in twenty pupils (5.2%) reported that they had bullied others in school at least 2 times a month in the previous couple of months
- Significantly more boys (6.6%) than girls (3.7%) reported bullying others in school; but there was no change with age for either boys or girls
- Reports by boys of bullying others decreased between 1994 and 1998 in Scotland
- Approximately one in seven (15.4%) pupils reported being in a fight 3 or more times in the past year
- Significantly more boys (23.3%) than girls (7.2%) reported fighting 3 or more times; involvement in fighting decreased with age for boys from 29.2% of P7s to 18.1% of S4s but remained stable for girls
- The majority of reported fighters (81.3%) are not involved in bullying
- Cross-nationally, reported bullying in Scotland is lower than in many other European countries, Canada and the USA but reported fighting in Scotland ranks 10th out of 35 countries

Acknowledgements

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HBSC publications and HBSC Information

See CAHRU website (www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/projects/hbhc) and also the International Study website (www.hbhc.org). CAHRU is the International Coordinating Centre of the HBSC Study.

Reports from this and earlier surveys include:

Alexander LM, Currie C, Todd J, Smith R (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 7: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on physical activity, TV viewing, eating habits, body image and oral hygiene*. Edinburgh: CAHRU

Alexander LM, Currie C, Todd J, Smith R (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 6: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on health-related risk*. Edinburgh: CAHRU

Alexander LM, Currie C, Todd J, Smith R (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 5: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on physical and emotional well-being*. Edinburgh: CAHRU

Alexander LM, Currie C (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 4. Mental-health and well-being in the context of school: Young people in Scotland*. Edinburgh: CAHRU

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