

Bullying Prevention Is Crime Prevention

JAMES C. BACKSTROM, DAKOTA COUNTY ATTORNEY HASTINGS, MINNESOTA

BULLYING BEHAVIOR may seem rather insignificant compared to kids bringing guns to school or getting involved with drugs. Bullying is often dismissed as part of growing up—a rite of passage. It's actually an early form of aggressive and violent behavior on the part of the bully. When left unresolved, it can be very traumatic on the part of the victim and even bystanders.

Since launching an anti-bullying and harassment educational program during the 2002-03 school year in my community, I've brought an anti-bullying intervention and prevention message to over 14,000 students, parents and school personnel. I was once asked why I as a prosecutor would waste my time talking about this issue instead of working to lock up real criminals. I quickly pointed out the report *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids* that six out of 10 boys who bully will have a criminal record before age 24. Like *Fight Crime: Invest in Kids*, my belief is that bullying prevention is crime prevention. I believe that reducing bullying and harassing behavior by youth ultimately reduces juvenile crime and other forms of illegal and aggressive behaviors such as domestic assaults, child abuse, animal cruelty and road rage, among others.

Recent research suggests that young people who are bullied may not always tell adults as they may be afraid or ashamed. This may result in a student being victimized for a prolonged period of time before it is discovered. Consequently, bullying carries the potential for serious short, medium and long-term adverse impacts. We have, unfortunately, all witnessed the ultimate tragedy that can result from bullying behavior when a teenage victim in

On January 14, 2010 Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old girl who was a recent immigrant from Ireland, hanged herself after being tormented over an extended period of time by six of her South Hadley High School classmates. This case, being prosecuted by Northwestern District Attorney and NDAA Board member Elizabeth D. Scheibel, is one of the highest profile cases of bullying behavior in recent years. Betsy Scheibel called Prince's death "the culmination of a nearly three-month campaign of verbally assaultive behavior and threats of physical harm." Scheibel added: "The investigation revealed relentless activity directed toward Phoebe, designed to humiliate her and to make it impossible for her to remain at school. The bullying, for her, became intolerable." Six teens, two male and four female, were indicted, three as adults and three as youthful offenders, in connection to Phoebe Prince's death on felony charges including criminal harassment, stalking, violation of civil rights and, for the males, statutory rape.

Massachusetts took her own life recently. [See insert above.]

In order for schools to carry out their duty of providing all students with a safe environment in which to

learn, grow and develop, schools need to enlist the support and cooperation of parents and others in the community to take a strong position not to tolerate bullying behavior in any form. Obtaining support from community leaders in law enforcement, prosecution, social services and public health can also be important.

A number of prosecutors like myself have initiated anti-bullying programs in their offices. In our program, we obtained permission to use some outstanding PowerPoint slides with video clips and graphics created by the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office in New Jersey. We then added some local statistics and fine tuned it to meet our own needs. I personally present this to fifth and sixth grade students across our community. Why fifth and sixth graders? I believe that you can have the most impact on students at this age level and we know from statistics that bullying behavior gets worse when kids move on from elementary schools to middle or junior high schools. I have also created an adult version of our anti-bullying program to show to parents and teachers.

Our program highlights what bullying is, how bystanders are adversely impacted, and how bystanders can become part of the solution to the problem by reporting the bullying behavior to an adult. We offer tips for safety to both victims and bystanders. We stress the importance of "telling someone" because far too many young people are afraid to seek help out of embarrassment, fear or because they simply don't know who they can safely talk to about the bullying which is occurring. I also share with students that they are the keys to a successful anti-bullying campaign because they know who the bullies are. [See insert on page 24.]

I also tell the kids that I know what it's like to be the victim of bullies because it happened to me when I was in the fourth or fifth grade, as it happens to 75 percent of children at one point or another in their lives. This problem is pervasive. It is estimated that nearly one in every six middle school students is regularly harassed or attacked by a bully, and as many as 160,000 children miss school every day in America out of fear of bullying. We simply cannot continue to tolerate this aggressive and harassing behavior. Too many kids are victimized and hurt by it.

We often think of bullies as mean and aggressive boys and while boys who bully may outnumber girls and be more physical in their negative behavior, girls who bully others cause significant trauma as well. With girls, the harm is often done through more covert forms of aggression,

such as social exclusion or ostracizing, manipulation and rumor spreading. These negative actions can be very hurtful to young women. According to Laura Hess of Purdue University, "The consequences of being aggressive and disruptive are much more negative for girls than for boys. This may explain why girls tend to be covert in their aggression."

One of the newest forms of bullying is known as "cyberbullying." Cyberbullying is repeated harm inflicted through the use of electronic media. It happens in chat rooms, via emails, or through social networking sites. Because of the aura of secrecy provided through anonymous cyberbullying, the things said are often far worse than anyone would say to someone face to face. Threats made in cyberbullying can constitute crimes. It is estimated that 42 percent of kids have been bullied while online and 35 percent of kids have been threatened online.

The connection between bullies and crime is a clear one. One large U.S. study found that the most serious bullies (those who frequently bullied others both in and out of school) were seven times more likely to report that they had carried a weapon to school in the prior month. A study in Sweden showed that almost 60 percent of boys who were bullies in grades six through nine were convicted of at least one crime by age 24. Even more alarming was the finding that 40 percent of these bullies had three or more criminal convictions by age 24. [See insert on page 24.]

Some states have adopted specific laws relating to bullying behavior. In Minnesota, our legislation states that each school board shall adopt a written policy prohibiting intimidation and bullying of any student. The policy must address intimidation and bullying in all forms, including but not limited to electronic forms and forms involving Internet use.

Many of the factors that put a child at risk for bullying behavior are the same factors that put a child at risk for drug use, violence and/or other delinquent behavior. Mental health problems also are often lurking just below the surface in youth who bully. When we address the risk factors for bullying and intervene in these cases as early as possible, we also address the risk factors for these other problems and future criminal behavior. I am not suggesting that all of this intervention should start in a prosecutor's office. To the contrary, these interventions need to start in schools, but I do believe that a prosecutor, as a community leader, can help raise the level of awareness

of this pervasive problem as part of a crime prevention strategy. A recent review of programs designed to prevent bullying has found that they led to decreases in victimization ranging from 17-23 percent.

In Dakota County, Minnesota, we have not only implemented a community awareness campaign to help address the bullying problem as I have described above, we have implemented policies to help us identify who the bullies are when we receive juvenile crime referrals in our office. We ask our school liaison officers (if they exist) and school teachers and administrators to include as much background information on crime referrals as possible. If we simply receive a report of five kids fighting in a school hallway, it is not easy to identify who the aggressor(s) may be. However, if we are told that one of the kids involved in the fight has reported being bullied by some of the other incident participants in the past, we can and do make sure that the aggressors/bullies are treated more harshly. For example, we may file misdemeanor assault charges against the aggressors/bullies and lesser disorderly conduct charges against others involved. Also, with support from our juvenile court bench, we typically obtain at least one night in detention for a youth who punches, intimidates or harasses another youth as part of on-going bullying behavior following a conviction for misdemeanor assault, harassment or a similar crime.

The purpose of our bullying intervention efforts is to identify the behavior early, before it escalates, and try to put a stop to it. I have been grateful for the support of Dakota County schools, law enforcement agencies and our juvenile court bench as we try to stop bullying behavior before it escalates into a tragedy like that which led to the death of Phoebe Prince in Massachusetts.

For a complete copy of the bullying PowerPoint programs (one for students and one for adults) used by the Dakota County Attorney's Office, contact Monica Jensen at 651.438.4440 or e-mail her at monica.jensen@co.dakota.mn.us. Other resources for further information about bullying and bullying prevention are listed below.

The motto I leave with youth and schools in Dakota County as part of our anti-bullying/harassment educational program is "Not Here, No Way, Not In Our School." All of us working in prosecution, law enforcement and education should stand united in efforts to effectively address incidents of bullying behavior as we seek to help keep our schools the safe environment for learning which they need to be.

Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom tells fifth and sixth grade students that this is his favorite slide in a bullying PowerPoint he presents because it was written by a 12-year-old girl:

Students are the Key to a Successful Anti-Bullying Campaign

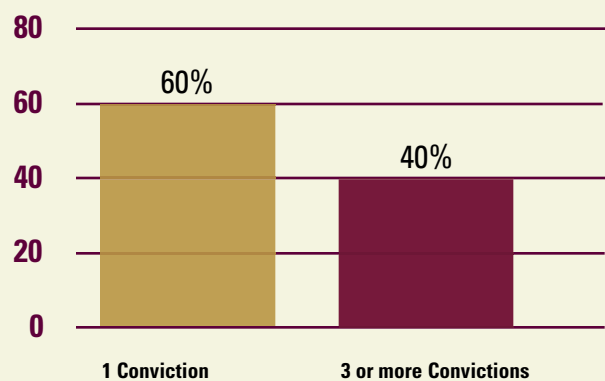
How Can We Change ... ?

To smile instead of glare.
To compliment instead of gossip.
To shake hands instead of fighting.

To stand with those who are afraid.
To help those who need help.
And have zero tolerance for bullying.

These are choices we can make.
We must follow the right path,
or become the bullies ourselves!

Boys Who Bully Are More Likely To Commit Crimes (By Age 24)



Taken from *Fight Crime: Invest In Kids'* 2003 research brief: "Bullying Prevention Is Crime Prevention."