How do students experience bullying?

While bullying is a perennial problem in schools, it is one that students are often reticent to talk about openly. Students who are bullied often fail to report it out of fear of becoming a greater target, or because they may be uncomfortable coming forward. As a result, even the most involved school leaders may not know how much or what kind of bullying is occurring in their schools, as well as why students feel they are bullied. YouthTruth asks students directly about their experiences with school climate and culture — including bullying — through an anonymous online survey.

We analyzed data collected from nearly 80,000 public school students across the country in grades five through twelve, and uncovered three key insights:

1. Rates of bullying vary widely across schools.

2. Most bullying happens in person, not online. But when students are victims of cyberbullying, they are usually being bullied in person as well.

3. The top three reasons students believe they are bullied include their appearance, their race or skin color, and because other students thought they were gay.
Rates of bullying vary across schools.

It is generally reported, and our data confirms, that nearly one in four students in America’s public schools are bullied. While this broad statistic is a troubling but informative benchmark, our data reveals greater nuance in the range of bullying across schools. At one extreme, a full 59 percent of students at a school whose students we surveyed reported being bullied. On the other end, the school surveyed with the lowest rates of bullying found that just 12 percent of students reported being bullied.

1 in 4 students surveyed reported being bullied.

This variation has critical implications for those leading school systems. It is unlikely that students are having uniform experiences with bullying across all schools in a district. Understanding the range of student experiences across different campuses can help prioritize resources and interventions where they are needed most.
Most bullying happens in person, not online.

Cyberbullying has been a hot topic over the past several years. However, the vast majority of bullied students still experience in-person harassment, not cyberbullying. Of those who were bullied, the most commonly reported type of bullying is verbal harassment (79 percent), followed by social harassment (50 percent), and physical bullying (29 percent). Cyberbullying accounts for only 25 percent of bullying.

But let’s unpack what happens when students are cyberbullied. Our data suggests that cyberbullying does not stay online: of those students who experienced cyberbullying, 74 percent were also verbally harassed, 68 percent also reported being socially harassed, and 38 percent also reported physical harassment. In short, cyberbullying does not exist in a vacuum, and often occurs in tandem with real-world harassment.

Types of Bullying

- **Verbal Harassment**: 79%
- **Social Harassment**: 50%
- **Physical Bullying**: 29%
- **Cyber-Bullying**: 25%

Cyber-bullying doesn’t stay online.

- 74% report also being verbally harassed
- 68% report also being socially harassed
- 38% report also being physically harassed
The top three reasons students believe they are bullied are their appearance, their race or skin color, and because they were perceived as being gay.

What do students think is driving these acts of bullying? When asked why they thought they were being bullied, almost half of bullied students — 44 percent — think it’s because of how they look. Another 16 percent believe they were bullied because of their race or skin color, and 14 percent believe they were bullied because other students thought they were gay (regardless of how they actually identify).

When addressing issues around bullying, it helps to understand the reasons why students feel they are bullied. When equipped with this aggregate information, school leaders are better positioned to identify specific topics to be surfaced and concentrate on the highest-priority areas for changes in policy or culture.

When students have a venue to anonymously report their experiences of bullying, they may feel more comfortable sharing them. This allows school communities to gather more candid and accurate feedback. Student perception data can help teachers, principals, and administrators hone in on important insights — such as how many students feel they are bullied, in what ways, and why. Equipped with this information, educators can target their responses and allocate resources more effectively.

Students are the experts on their own experience. We believe this data provides an important comparative context for understanding student perspectives when it comes to bullying. We hope that these findings spark conversations within schools and communities about methods to identify and prevent bullying — and to incorporate student voice into those strategies.

www.youthtruthsurvey.org/bullying

Reasons for Bullying

- 44% of students say it's because of how they look
- 16% of students say it's because of their race or skin color
- 14% of students say it's because other students thought they were gay
- 12% of students say it's because of how much money their parents have
- 9% of students say it's because of their religion
- 9% of students say it's because of where their family is from
- 8% of students say it's because of their sex or gender
- 7% of students say it's because of a disability they have

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