

# Prevalence and pattern of traditional bullying, amongst secondary school students in Yenagoa, Nigeria

## Abstract:

**Introduction:** Traditional bullying among secondary school students is a persistent global public health problem; with varying long lasting mental, physical and academic consequences, not only on the victims but also the bullies and bystanders. It is a common phenomenon that is not limited to physical harm and manifest in many forms such as, verbal, or relational aggression, social exclusion and cyber bullying. Bullying is commonly embedded in power imbalances and can be a call for help from the bullies. Development of an efficient prevention and intervention strategy requires understanding of the causes (family issues, low self esteem or lack of positive role models) of traditional bullying. This study therefore, aimed to determine the prevalence and pattern of traditional bullying among secondary school students in Yenagoa Local Government, Bayelsa State Nigeria, which would aid development and implementation of appropriate antibullying policies.

**Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional study conducted from September 2021 to December 2021. Selection of the 1,108 students aged between 10-21 years, was by a two-stage sampling technique. The 46-item Bully Survey questionnaire adapted by Swearer et al was utilized for data collection. Quantitative data was summarised using descriptive statistics. Test of association was done using Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests and binomial logistic regression analysis to examine associations between variables, with p-value of  $<0.05$  considered significant.

**Results:** Prevalence rates of 40.3%, 81.3%, and 86.3% were found for bullying perpetration, victimization and bystander respectively. Verbal bullying such as hauling of insults was the most common form of bullying behaviour perpetrated (64.8%); with sexual bullying being the least type observed (20%). Both bullying perpetration (46.9%) and victimization (88.3%) were significantly more common among female participants, while being a bullying bystander

(99.4%) was commoner among male participants. Participants in junior classes were twice more likely to perpetrate bullying odds ratio [OR]: 2.053, confidence interval [CI]: 0.896-4.705 and those in schools with no anti-bullying policies were 1.26 times more likely to be perpetrators of bullying [OR] 1.269; CI: 0.229-7.031. School Class ( $p = 0.030$ ) and presence of anti-bullying policy ( $p = 0.004$ ) were significantly associated with bullying perpetration in the studied schools.

**Conclusion:** The prevalence of traditional bullying among secondary school students in Yenagoa was very high. We therefore recommended that school authorities and the government should formulate appropriate school anti-bullying policies and implement same; in order to curb the menace while shielding the weak groups from being victims of bullying in school.

**Key words:** Bullying, Prevalence, Pattern, Secondary schools.

## Introduction

Repeated acts of intentional intimidation of a weaker person who is unable to defend himself/herself, from a person/persons of greater strength as a result of a power differential is bullying as defined by Olweus.<sup>1,2</sup> This power differential may be physical, numerical, psychological or verbal.<sup>1</sup> Globally, 246 million children and adolescents are reported to experience bullying yearly.<sup>7</sup> In Africa, some studies have reported varying rates of 25%, 44.5%, and 62.8%,<sup>8-10</sup> while in Nigeria the rate reported has been between 33.1% -85%.<sup>11-13</sup> World over, secondary school students are bullied by peers with resultant harmful effects such as poor school results, mental health problems, vicious exhibition of bad behavior<sup>1-6</sup> A real or perceived power differential has to exist before being considered as bullying. Bullying is classified into traditional bullying [physical, verbal (name-calling, teasing) relational (societal segregation manipulating others and spreading gossip], and cyberbullying<sup>14</sup> Cyberbullying is a repeated aggression that occurs online or over electronic devices to hurt others,<sup>14</sup> exacerbated by the increased use of computers and cell phones. Within or around the school premises face to face bullying, that occurs among students is referred to as traditional bullying.<sup>14</sup>

Traditional bullying, a serious public health problem is associated with increased mental health problems, increased crime rates including weapon carrying, use of alcohol as well as other substances.<sup>15,16</sup> It is also been associated with poor concentration at school, poor academic performance, increased school drop out and in extreme cases suicide and death.<sup>17</sup> School-related

(school climate) individual (aggressive behavior, low empathy, poor social skills) and familial factors (family conflict, inadequate parental monitoring) also contribute to bullying perpetration and victimization of students.

Students, parents, teachers, and school administrators need to collaborate in an effort to create an accommodating setting that discourages bullying behavior. School-wide anti-bullying policies, promotion of positive school climate, encouraging compassion and sociable behavior, while providing social-emotional skills guidance<sup>19</sup> are some of the methods that could be used to prevent bullying. Restorative justice programmes that aim to rehabilitate the bullies rather than solely punish them should be employed by schools, because these programmes encourage bullies to acknowledge their action and make amends. Sporting activities help build empathy and friendship among peers<sup>20</sup> and promulgation of national anti-bullying laws with punishment of offenders would serve as a deterrent<sup>21</sup>. Currently, the school environment which was initially considered as a haven for learning and socialization, has become threatened by peer bullying with grievous consequences that hinder effective learning.<sup>1,15-17</sup>

The pervasiveness of traditional bullying amongst students underscores the necessity for focused interventions to address this insidious issue; made more critical because parents and teachers still regard bullying as part of childhood experience which children must learn to tolerate as part of growing up.<sup>18</sup> This study, therefore aimed to determine the prevalence and pattern of traditional bullying among students attending private and public secondary schools in Yenagoa, Nigeria. It is hoped that policy makers would develop a comprehensive prevention program after understanding the factors associated with bullying; while working to fashion a secure and all-encompassing school atmosphere that encourage prosocial behavior, empathy, and valuable disagreement resolution ability.

## **Methodology**

### **Study design**

The study was a cross sectional study carried out among 1,108 students aged 10-21 years old that were randomly selected from 10 public and 10 private secondary schools in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria in 2021.

### **Study population**

The study was a descriptive cross-sectional study. A multistage sampling technique was used to select 20 schools from a line list of all secondary schools in Yenagoa Local Government Area obtained from the Education Ministry of the State. Within selected schools (stratified into Private and Public), participants were recruited from each class determined by proportional allocation using the school's register. Students were stratified as males and females using the class register. Subjects were selected from each stratum by simple random sampling (balloting). This study used the Bully Survey questionnaire adapted by Swearer et al<sup>19</sup> to evaluate the bullying behavior of secondary school students in Nigeria. The 46-item questionnaire provided students with a clear definition of bullying and contains three key characteristics: (1) frequency of bullying, (2) victimization, (3) perpetration (4) bystander. Questions about different types of bullying, including sexual bullying were also included in the questionnaire. A total of 1,200 questionnaires were distributed to participants in their classes, however only 1,108 were analyzed due to improper filling of questionnaires.

A victim is a subject who reported to have been bullied; those who have ever bullied others repeatedly in the previous 3 months were considered, bully(s).

**Ethical approval:** Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Ethics committee of Federal Medical Centre Yenagoa, Nigeria (FMCY/REC/ECC/2019/OCT/211) and permission sought from the Bayelsa State Ministry of Education and the various heads of schools. Written informed consent was obtained from parents of participants and assent also obtained before commencement of the study.

**Data Analysis:** Data was analysed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the socio-demographic and bullying characteristics. The prevalence rates and pattern of traditional bullying were summarized using frequency and percentages. The association between categorical variables i.e traditional bullying experiences of participants (perpetrators, victims and bystanders), and sociodemographic factors were determined using the Chi-square test and for tables containing cells less than 5, the Fisher's exact test was used. Binomial logistic regression was used to determine factors that independently predict the outcome. The level of significance was set at  $<0.05$ .

## Results

### Characteristics of the study participants

Of the 1,200 students recruited into the study, 1108 returned completed questionnaires which were analysed, giving a response rate of 92.3%. There was approximately equal representation of boys and girls 1:1.26 and the mean age of the participants was  $13.7 \pm 1.9$ . The highest proportion of participants (635: 57.3%) belonged to the middle socio-economic class. The bulk of subjects (771:69.6%) were Ijaw, from monogamous homes (711:64.2%) and in Senior Secondary I class (28.2%) respectively.

Table 1.

**Table I: Sociodemographic characteristics of participants**

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Frequency N=1,108</b>	<b>Percent %</b>
<b>Age category (years)</b>		
10-13	509	45.9
14-17	574	51.9
18-21	25	2.2
<b>Sex</b>		
Female	618	55.8
Male	490	44.2
<b>School type</b>		
Public	555	50.1
Private	553	49.9
<b>Family type</b>		
Monogamous	711	64.2
Polygamous	314	28.3
Others (single, separated, divorced)	83	7.5
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Ijaw	771	69.6
Igbo	197	17.8
Urhobo/Isoko	86	7.8
Yoruba	38	3.4
Others	16	1.4
<b>Socioeconomic status (SES)</b>		
Upper	300	27.1
Middle	635	57.3
Lower	173	15.6

## Prevalence and categories of bullying experienced by gender

All 1108 participants,(100% of respondents) had experienced at least one form of bullying or the other in the three months preceding the study.Overall, 446 (40.3%; 95% CI = 74.3-82.6%) of the participants perpetrated at least one type of bullying. Bullying victims were 901(81.3%) while 956(86.3%) had witnessed their peers being bullied. Bullying perpetration, 290 (46.9%) and victimization 546 (988.3%), was significantly more common among female participants, while being a bullying bystander (99.4%) was commoner among male participants.[ $p < 0.001$ ]

**Table II: Prevalence and categories of traditional bullying by gender.**

Category of bullying	Total (N=1,108)		Males N=490		Females N=618		$\chi^2$	p value
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
<b>Perpetration</b>								
Yes	446	40.3	156	31.8	290	46.9	25.87	<0.001*
No	662	59.7	334	68.2	328	53.1		
<b>Victimization</b>								
Yes	901	81.3	355	72.4	546	88.3	45.48	<0.001*
No	207	18.7	135	27.6	72	11.7		
<b>Bystander</b>								
Yes	956	86.3	487	99.4	469	75.9	127.49	<0.001*
No	152	13.7	3	0.6	149	24.1		

### Types of bullying meted by perpetrators

As shown in table III, verbal bullying was reported as the most commonly perpetrated (64.8%), while sexual bullying was the least (20%). A significant association was noted between gender and type of bullying perpetrated, with verbal (73.1%) and relational bullying (34.5%) being more common among female participants, while physical (79.5%) and sexual bullying were commonly perpetrated by males (31.4%) [ $p < 0.001$ ] respectively.

**Table III: Types of bullying meted by perpetrators**

Bullying types	Total=446		Males N=156		Females N=290		$\chi^2$	p value
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
<b>Verbal</b>								
Yes	289	64.8	77	49.4	212	73.1	25.07	<0.001*
No	157	35.2	79	50.6	78	26.9		
<b>Physical</b>								
Yes	200	44.8	124	79.5	76	26.2	116.42	<0.001*
No	246	55.2	32	20.5	214	73.8		
<b>Relational</b>								
Yes	129	28.9	29	18.6	100	34.5	12.46	<0.001*
No	317	71.1	127	81.4	190	65.5		
<b>Sexual</b>								
Yes	89	20.0	49	31.4	40	13.8	19.71	<0.001*
No	357	80.0	107	68.6	250	86.2		

### Types of bullying experienced by the victims

Table IV shows that verbal bullying was the most commonly experienced type (64.2%) while sexual attack was the least. Male victims experienced more of physical bullying (52.9%) compared to their female counterparts (18.5%) [ $p < 0.001$ ]. Relational bullying however was more commonly experienced by female victims (67.6%) compared to males (54.4%), [ $p < 0.001$ ]. Although female victims experienced verbal and sexual victimization slightly more than their male counterparts, the differences were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.917$ , and 0.212)

**Table IV: Types of bullying experienced by the victims**

Bullying types	Total N=901		Females N=546		Males=355		$\chi^2$	P-value
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
<b>Verbal</b>								
Yes	578	64.2	351	64.3	227	63.9	0.010	0.917
No	323	35.8	195	35.7	128	36.1		
<b>Physical</b>								
Yes	289	32.1	101	18.5	188	52.9	117.25	<0.001*
No	612	67.9	445	81.5	167	47.1		
<b>Sexual</b>								
Yes	57	6.3	39	7.1	18	5.1	1.56	0.212
No	844	93.7	507	92.9	337	94.9		
<b>Relational</b>								
Yes	377	41.8	369	67.6	193	54.4	16.01	<0.001*
No	524	58.2	177	32.4	162	45.6		

### Types of bullying witnessed by bystanders

Table V shows that verbal bullying was the most commonly witnessed form (42.8%). While physical bullying was more commonly witnessed by male participants (38.4%), [ $p < 0.001$ ], there were no significant differences between males and females who witnessed verbal, sexual

Bullying	Total N=956	Males N=487	Females N=469	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> value
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and relational bullying ( $p=0.932$ ,  $0.841$  and  $0.802$ ) respectively.

<b>types</b>									
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%			
<b>Verbal</b>									
Yes	409	42.8	209	42.9	200	42.6	0.007	0.932	
No	556	58.2	278	57.1	269	57.4			
<b>Physical</b>									
Yes	303	31.7	187	38.4	116	24.7	20.61	<0.001*	
No	653	68.3	300	61.6	353	75.3			
<b>Sexual</b>									
Yes	188	19.7	97	19.9	91	19.4	0.04	0.841	
No	768	80.3	390	80.1	378	80.6			
<b>Relational</b>									
Yes	288	30.1	149	30.6	140	29.9	0.06	0.802	
No	668	69.9	338	69.4	329	70.1			

**Table V: Types of bullying witnessed by bystanders**

**Types of bullying perpetrated according to school type.**

Table VI shows that verbal (35.7) and physical (27%) bullying perpetration were significantly higher among participants attending public schools, compared to those attending private schools (16.5% and 9.0% respectively), [ $P=<0.001$ ]. Conversely, relational bullying was significantly more frequent among those who attended private secondary schools (18.1%) compared to public schools (5.2), [ $p<0.001$ ]. There was however, no significant difference in the prevalence of sexual bullying between private and public secondary schools ( $p=0.926$ )

**Table VI: Types of bullying perpetration according to school type**

		Total N=1,108		Private N=553		Public N=555		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i> value
Types of bullying		Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%		
<b>Verbal</b>									
Yes		289	26.1	91	16.5	198	35.7	53.07	<0.001*
No		819	73.9	462	83.5	357	65.3		
<b>Physical</b>									
Yes		200	18.1	50	9.0	150	27.0	60.57	<0.001*
No		908	81.9	503	91.0	405	73.0		
<b>Sexual</b>									
Yes		89	8.0	44	8.0	45	8.1	0.009	0.926
No		1019	92.0	509	92.0	510	91.9		
<b>Relational</b>									
Yes		129	11.6	100	18.1	29	5.2	44.52	<0.001*
No		979	88.4	453	81.9	526	94.8		

As a summary, the logistic regression performed to ascertain the effects of Age, Gender, School Type, School Class, Socioeconomic Class, Family Type, Parental Fight, Home Bullying and Anti-bullying Policy on bullying perpetration revealed a statistically significant model  $\chi^2_{(df, 17)} = 1312, p < 0.000$ . School Class ( $p = 0.030$ ) and presence of Anti-Bullying Policy ( $p = 0.004$ ) were significantly associated with bullying perpetration in the studied schools. Participants in junior classes were twice more likely to perpetrate bullying and those in schools with no anti-bullying policies were 1.26times more likely to be perpetrators of bullying.

## Logistic Regression Analysis Report for Bullying Perpetrators

Variables	B	p-value	Odds ratio	95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
				Lower	Upper
<b>AGE</b>					
10-13	.840	1.000	2.315	.000	
14-17	19.958	.999	465116820.622	.000	
18-21	1				
<b>SEX</b>					
Female	-20.584	.997	.000	.000	
Male	1				
<b>SCHTYPE</b>					
Public	-.542	1.000	.582	.000	
Private	1				
<b>SCH CLASS</b>					
Junior	0.720	0.030	2.053	0.896	4.705
Senior	1				
<b>SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS</b>					
Upper	-20.066	.998	.000	.000	
Middle	-.460	1.000	.631	.000	
Lower	1				
<b>FAMILY TYPE</b>					
Polygamous	.108	1.000	1.114	.000	
Monogamous	.245	1.000	1.277	.000	
Others	1				
<b>PARENTAL FIGHT</b>					
Yes	-2.808	0.083	0.060	0.001	6.479
No	1				
<b>HOME-BULLYING</b>					
Yes	.135	1.000	1.145	.000	
No	1				
<b>ANTI-BULLYPOLICY</b>					
No	0.238	0.004	1.269	0.229	7.031
Yes	1				

## Discussion

The present study demonstrates a high burden of traditional bullying behaviour among students in Secondary schools in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Nigeria, a resource poor country. The index study also demonstrates that at least one form of bullying had been perpetrated by a high percentage of participants. This high proportion is distressing, when the immediate and long-term effect of bullying is considered; where the perpetrator could be expelled from school with consequent metamorphosis into a juvenile delinquent engaging in cultism and other social vices. Additionally, bullying perpetration at an early age, has been shown to amplify the odds of extending into adult life; as criminality, vandalism, sexual harassment and intimate partner violence.<sup>17, 20, 21</sup>

Findings of the current study revealed high prevalence of 40.3% and 81.3% reported for perpetration and victimization bullying respectively; while 86.3% of participants had witnessed their peers being bullied in the preceding three months. This is in tandem with reports by Alex Hart et al<sup>13</sup> in Port Harcourt, and Adeosun et al<sup>16</sup> in Lagos Nigeria; who noted similarly higher rates of bullying victimization than perpetration among secondary school students. This is not surprising because studies have shown that participants are less likely to identify themselves as perpetrators of bullying during self-report surveys such as was used in the present study because no one wants to be portrayed in bad light.<sup>22</sup> It is also possible that students feel they may be punished if they admit to be perpetrators of bullying. Similar to the present study, Okoli and Ettu<sup>23</sup> in Owerri also reported a high prevalence rate among bullying bystanders. Findings from the index study however contrast with those of Egbochuku<sup>12</sup> who reported bullying perpetration to be more frequent than victimization among younger junior secondary school students in Benin City. The prevalence rates of traditional bullying in different studies vary, probably due to

methodological differences in reporting, definition, and time frame assessed. The rates obtained in this study are notably higher compared to 8.6% obtained from a study in Sweden.<sup>7</sup> This difference in prevalence could be due to media attention, anti-bullying campaigns in Sweden, a high income country. Another plausible reason for the higher rate in index study could be attributed to differences in methodology; while the present study sampled all students in secondary school irrespective of their ages, Craig *et al*<sup>7</sup> studied students aged 11, 13 and 15 years.

While bullying victimization in the index study was observed commonly among participants aged 10-13 years, perpetration was highest among those aged 14-17 years. Bullying is said to occur when there is a power imbalance either in size, physical or emotional strength between victims and perpetrators.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore possible that the likely smaller physical frame and size of participants in the younger age category (10-13 years) made them easy targets for older participants who were likely to be bigger and stronger. This is similar to findings by Alex-Hart *et al*<sup>13</sup> in Port Harcourt who observed younger aged participants to be bullied more, compared to their older counterparts.

Verbal bullying (hurtful name calling) was the most prevalent form of bullying perpetrated in this study. It was demonstrated to be more prevalent in females who have been presumed to be more talkative in nature with less physical strength.<sup>24</sup> Bauer *et al*<sup>21</sup> had similar findings in United States of America, where females were noted to be more of bullying perpetrators and victims compared to males. However, some other studies in Nigeria<sup>13, 18</sup> and the USA<sup>25</sup> have found physical perpetration to be the most prevalent followed by verbal bullying. Verbal bullying is the easiest form to perpetrate but most difficult to detect, hence its high prevalence. This may be so, because there is no physical evidence to prove that verbal bullying is being perpetrated by a student. It goes on unnoticed, with resultant debilitating effect on victim's mental health and education.

Although there was no statistically significant difference in the prevalence of being a bullying bystander by gender, more females were found to be perpetrators and victims compared to males. Females are more likely to be victims of bullying possibly because, the female gender trait makes it easier for them to be targets due to reduced physical strength.<sup>24</sup> However, this is in contrast to findings by Oguchi *et al*<sup>26</sup> who observed no significant difference in the prevalence of bullying victimization between male and female participants in Kano, Nigeria. Also in contrast,

Rana *et al*<sup>27</sup> in India observed that more males were bullying perpetrators and victims compared to females.

Another striking finding was that bullying was significantly higher among participants in public schools compared to those in private schools. A plausible reason for this may be because students in private schools have been shown to have better teachers' supervision than those in public schools.<sup>28</sup> This is similar to findings by Oguchi *et al*<sup>26</sup> in Kano, Nigeria who reported bullying to be more prevalent among participants who attended public schools. Findings by Chaux *et al*<sup>29</sup> however disagrees with findings in the index study, as they observed bullying to be more prevalent among participants who attended private schools in Colombia.

**Limitation:** Self-report studies, can lead to underestimation of the prevalence of traditional bullying. To limit this, anonymity was ensured and confidentiality assured before the commencement of data collection. However, the facts that some bullies may unlikely admit such act particularly as it was self-reported, limits the work.

**Conclusion:** Bullying effect could be lifelong and its impact continuing beyond adolescent years. Prevalence of bullying perpetration amongst participants in the index study was high with verbal bullying being the commonest form. Those whose parents were divorced, in public schools and from low socio-economic class were more likely to be perpetrators of bullying. Parents should be educated on the need to teach children compassion and benevolence towards others (through character education programmes that emphasize respect and tolerance) and the consequences divorce can have on their children, especially outside the home. Administrators of schools should show that bullying is unacceptable, by showing interest in bullying behaviour among students; schools provide anonymous reporting boxes, online platforms for reporting bullying (crucial in identifying and addressing problems promptly). Victims of bullying need immediate and consistent support therefore, government in concert with school administrators should formulate and launch adequate anti-bullying policies in secondary schools across Nigeria; which should be implemented to improve the school environment and create a safer environment for all learners. The emotional aftermath of bullying can be difficult to cope with, therefore counseling and support groups are invaluable for victims and bystanders.

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