

BYSTANDERS

Professor Ian Rivers
School of Sport & Education
Brunel University
UXBRIDGE UB8 3PH, UK

Telephone:
+44 (0)1895 267636 direct

Facsimile:
+44 (0)1895 268768

E-mail:
ian.rivers@brunel.ac.uk



Briefing Note 1

The forgotten victims of bullying

IAN RIVERS' RESEARCH ON STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH SHOWS THAT STUDENTS WHO WITNESS BULLYING ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE TOBACCO OR ALCOHOL, TO BE DEPRESSED, AND TO MISS OR SKIP SCHOOL.

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Bystanders

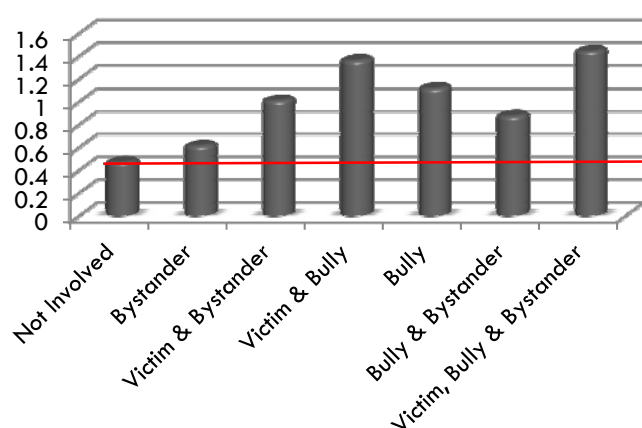
THE FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF BULLYING

Bystanders: The cost

Currently it is estimated that 63% of pupils witness bullying behaviour at school¹. To date, very little attention has been paid to the effects of observing bullying upon children and young people.

A series of studies conducted by Ian Rivers^{2,3} and his colleagues on a sample of 2,002 British school children (mean age 13.6 years) has shown that bystanders are significantly affected by the bullying they witness or hear about, so much so that they may be at an increased risk of self-harming behaviour (see *Figure 1*). The single most significant predictor of suicide risk among bystanders was found to be *POWERLESSNESS*⁴.

Figure 1: Mean Scores Suicide Risk by Status



Rivers and colleagues¹ also found higher rates of absenteeism and substance abuse, along with depression and anxiety among school pupils who had witnessed bullying.

The results from these studies indicate that observing bullying behaviour can negatively impact psychological functioning and thus places many young people at *INCREASED RISK OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS WHILE AT SCHOOL*.

Previous studies of bullying that have included a measure of mental health may have *UNDER-ESTIMATED* its negative impact by assuming bystanders and those not involved are the same.

REFERENCES

1. Rivers, I. et al. (2009). Observing bullying at school: The mental health implications of witness status. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 24(4), 211-223.
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3. Rivers, I. (in press). Morbidity among bystanders of bullying behavior at school: Concepts, concerns, & clinical/research issues. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine & Health*.
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