BYSTANDERS

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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.

U.S. SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, ARNE DUNCAN
21ST SEPTEMBER, 2011, WASHINGTON, D.C.
Bystanders: The cost

Currently it is estimated that 63% of pupils witness bullying behaviour at school\(^1\). 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\(^4\).

Rivers and colleagues\(^1\) 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**