



Iowa's anti-bullying law: Is it working?

March 2017



Bullying is associated with poor school performance, depression, anxiety, suicidal behaviors and aggression towards others. The Injury Prevention Research Center evaluated the effectiveness of Iowa's anti-bullying legislation in preventing bullying. Our study helps us understand how student and teacher behaviors changed after the passage of the new law.

Visit our website www.uiiprc.org

Key Findings



In Iowa, about 47% of middle and high school students reported being bullied either relationally, verbally, physically or through cyber space.



There was an increase in reported bullying in the year immediately after the state's anti-bullying law went into effect. This was followed by a decrease in the chances of being frequently bullied three years after the law compared to one year after the law.



Cyberbullying was the only type of bullying that increased over time.



Teacher intervention was associated with almost a 50% decrease in the chances of all bullying. However, the law did not improve teacher intervention. While such intervention was common (reported by about 76% of students), it is happening less often over time.



Iowa's anti-bullying law has some promise for improving traditional forms of bullying, but not for newer forms of cyberbullying.

Anti-bullying laws grew in the U.S.

Between 1999 and 2010, anti-bullying policies increased in the U.S. All 50 states now have an anti-bullying law. These laws vary in their requirements and recommendations, and little is known about their effectiveness of in reducing bullying. However, researchers at the University of Iowa and Columbia University began to investigate this through an evaluation of 25 state anti-bullying laws.

Bullying is peer-on-peer aggressive behavior that occurs repeatedly over time and arises from a power imbalance.

Iowa's anti-bullying law

Iowa Code 280.28 was enacted in 2007, and requires schools to define acts of bullying, put into place a process for reporting incidents, and describe consequences and actions for bully perpetrators. To support school districts, the Iowa Department of Education and local educational agencies established an informational website and a state bullying reporting system, and provided trainings throughout the state.

For more information contact iprc@uiowa.edu

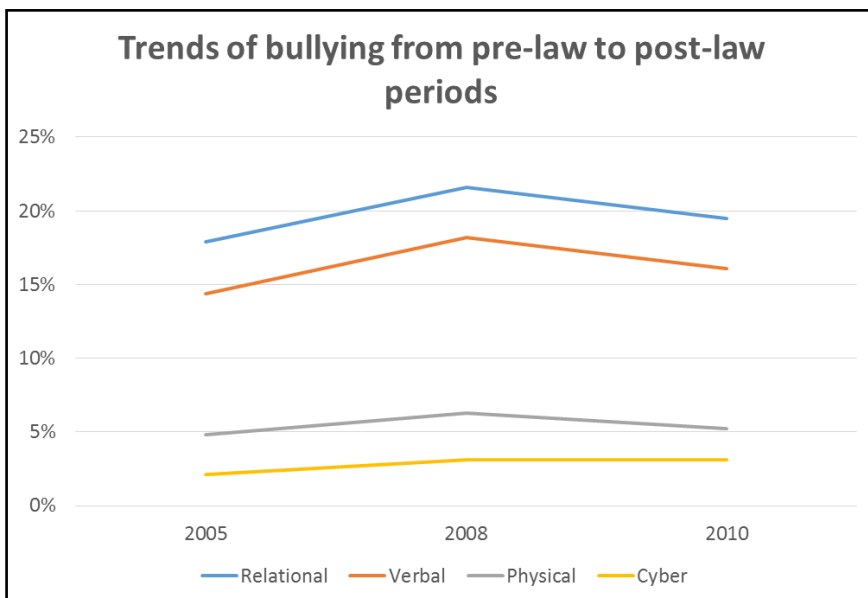
In our evaluation, we compared students and teachers behaviors before and after the passage of the law. We used data from the 2005, 2008 and 2010 Iowa Youth Survey, a statewide survey of all 6th, 8th and 11th grade students conducted by the Iowa Department of Public Health. Approximately 253,000 students from every county across Iowa participated in the survey during the study period. This represented over 70% of 6th and 8th graders and over 61% of 11th graders in the state.

Relational and verbal bullying are the most common.

In Iowa, about 47% of surveyed students reported being bullied either relationally (like spreading rumors, exclusion), verbally, physically or through cyber space. Relational and verbal bullying occurred with similar frequency, impacting about 38% of students. Physical bullying was much less common and affected about 15% of students. Cyberbullying was the least common form (7-9%).

Law increased awareness and reporting.

Compared with pre-law levels in 2005, there was increased relational, verbal and physical bullying in 2008 (one year post-law) followed by a decrease in 2010 (three years post-law). However, there was increased cyberbullying throughout this time period. Our findings suggest that anti-bullying laws might reduce relational, verbal and physical bullying, through first an increased awareness and increased reporting of bullying and then a trend towards decreased bullying in the longer term.



Cyberbullying appears unaffected by Iowa's law.

Cyberbullying is likely the most difficult form of bullying for schools to address. An explosion in internet accessibility leads to new avenues for cyberbullying and increased exposure. It is possible that anti-bullying laws have not kept up with technological advancements.

Teacher intervention did not improve.

Teacher intervention was associated with less bullying in Iowa, but unfortunately, the law did not improve such intervention over time. One reason is that increased awareness among students may have increased expectations of teacher intervention post-law—or, that the law did not truly impact how much teachers intervened on bullying.

What's next?

Our findings point to the need of:

- ⇒ **More research on cyberbullying**
- ⇒ **Focused intervention training of teachers**
- ⇒ **Future research to assess the long-term effects of the law, and how the law is implemented.**



**This study was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

**Acknowledgements: Iowa Department of Public Health; Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research (for access to the Iowa Youth Surveys)*