

# SCHOOL COUNSELOR USE OF PEER NOMINATIONS TO IDENTIFY VICTIMS OF BULLYING

*This study examined the use of peer nominations to identify victims of bullying in a sample of 7,889 students (grades 3-12). The overwhelming majority reported positive responses to the survey process, which used a randomized design for online or paper administration. School counselors interviewed students who had three or more nominations and saw confirmed victims for follow-up. Although further study is needed, these results support school counselor use of peer nominations to identify victims of bullying.*

School bullying has become widely recognized as a pervasive problem with both short-term and long-term adverse effects on victims (Juvonen & Graham, 2014; Swearer, Espelage, Vailancourt, & Hymel, 2010). In the short term, bullied students often become disengaged from school and their attendance and academic performance decline (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). The emotional consequences of victimization include anxiety, psychosomatic symptoms, social withdrawal, and, in some cases, provocative and aggressive behavior (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). In the long term, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that victims of bullying experience elevated risk for depression and other internalizing problems (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Reducing bullying in schools is of great interest worldwide, but the evidence for the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs has been mixed (Merrell, Gueldener, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Swearer et al., 2010; Vreeman

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& Carroll, 2007). A meta-analysis of 44 program evaluations found a wide range of outcomes, but on average, anti-bullying programs decreased bullying by 20-23% and victimization by 17-20% (Tofi & Farrington, 2011). In light of the serious effects of bullying on victims' academic, social, and emotional adjustment (Swearer et al., 2010), there is a need to identify effective strategies of identification and intervention. This study provides new evidence to support peer nominations as a promising method for school counselors to identify victims of bullying in order to facilitate more direct intervention. The study describes how school counselors can use peer nominations to identify victims of bullying, reports how students responded to the survey process, and provides follow-up information after students had received counseling.

## EVIDENCE FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ANTI-BULLYING PROGRAMS HAS BEEN MIXED.

School counselors face a serious barrier to intervention because bullying often goes unobserved and unreported (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey School Crime Supplement indicated that nearly two thirds of bullying victims failed to report their victimization to a teacher or other adult at their school (Petrosino, Guckenburg, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010). This problem was observed among boys and girls and across racial and ethnic groups. The study showed no differences in reporting between public or private schools and no association between reporting and measures of school safety and security measures. Similarly, a study of 2,229 victims of peer aggression in grades 5-12 found that only one third of victims told an adult at school (Sulkowski, Bauman, & Dinner, 2013).

Students have many reasons not to report bullying (Oliver & Candappa,

2007; Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). They may fear retaliation by bullies or the social stigma associated with being considered a snitch for telling on someone. They also may perceive that school authorities are unconcerned, unwilling, or unable to intervene effectively.

Bystanders or students who witness bullying are also unwilling to report it to school authorities, largely for the same reasons as victims. A Canadian study of bystander responses to bullying found that more than two thirds of students reported that they had witnessed bullying at school, but only 24% of these students indicated that they had talked to an adult either most of the time or always (Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Many theorists hold that bystanders play an integral role in a group process that reinforces bullying behavior (Salmivalli,

2010), and this also may discourage them from reporting bullying, especially if they have directly or indirectly supported the bullying. Recent approaches to bullying interventions have focused on motivating student bystanders to take a more active approach to stopping bullying (Kärnä et al., 2013).

### Limitations of Self-report

Conventional anti-bullying programs such as the Olweus program (Hazelden Foundation, 2014) rely on anonymous self-report surveys to measure the prevalence of bullying. Although this approach is based on good reasons (Olweus, 2010), anonymous self-report measures have two serious disadvantages. One is that school authorities may learn how many students are being bullied, but they do not know who is being bullied and therefore cannot directly intervene to stop the bullying until they observe the bullying or someone comes forward to report it. Research reports on anti-

bullying programs are largely silent about this critical step and provide no information on whether programs are successful at encouraging student reporting.

The second disadvantage is that anonymous surveys cannot be validated against independent criteria to determine whether students who report that they have been bullied actually have been bullied. Evidence for the validity of anonymous bullying surveys is restricted to non-independent criteria that are obtained concurrently from the student. Students who report that they are bullied may also consistently report low self-esteem, anxiety, or other commonly used correlates of bullying, but this would not demonstrate that the students were victims of bullying rather than some other form of peer conflict. Many critics have commented on the paucity of evidence to support this approach to the assessment of bullying (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Cross & Newman-Gonchar, 2004; Green, Felix, Sharkey, Furlong, & Kras, 2013).

An imbalance of power is a critical distinction between bullying and other forms of peer conflict that is easily overlooked by students (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014). One study (Green et al., 2013) compared the definition-first method of assessment employed by the widely used Olweus Bullying Victimization Questionnaire (BVQ; Olweus, 1996) with a behavioral measure that did not use the term "bullying" but included items that asked about the defining characteristics of bullying (intentional harm, repetition, and power imbalance). Although the two measures were highly correlated, they concluded that the BVQ measured repeated victimization and a broad range of victim experiences, but did not distinguish the characteristic power imbalance found in bullying from other forms of peer victimization. One consequence of this problem is that student self-reports would be inflated with reports of victim experiences that were not bullying.

Ybarra, Espelage, and Mitchell (2014) used a battery of carefully worded items to distinguish victims of peer aggression who met the power imbalance criterion for bullying from victims whose aggression was not bullying because they did not report a power imbalance. The study found that both groups experienced adverse effects from victimization, but that bullying was associated with more severe interference with daily functioning.

Cornell and Mehta (2011) used confidential, but not anonymous, surveys to identify 43 middle school students who self-reported as victims of bullying at least once per week in the past month. Two school counselors conducted follow-up interviews with these students and confirmed that just 24 (56%) met the conventional definition of bullying characterized by a power imbalance. Of the remaining students, 13 were judged to be involved in a peer conflict that was not bullying, two were victims of bullying prior to the question's timeframe (past month), and four claimed to have marked the survey in error.

### Peer Nominations

Many studies have used peer nominations to identify victims of bullying (e.g., see Baly, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2014; Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006), but it remains a controversial method. Critics have noted that peer nominations may not identify students whose victimization is unknown to their peers and that there is no standard cutoff for the number of nominations that indicate victimization status, making it less suitable to estimate prevalence rates (Olweus, 2010). Another concern is that students might not be comfortable with nominating their peers because it might seem like snitching.

However, peer nominations offer some important advantages to school counselors as well as researchers. Peer nominations can help provide school counselors with a list of students who might be victims of bullying. Although peer nominations, like all student reports of bullying, should be confirmed

by school counselors through investigation, this procedure gives schools an immediate, practical way to find cases of bullying. Peer nominations might be more effective than other efforts to encourage students to report bullying because students remain anonymous in their reports. They do not have to expose themselves to potential ridicule or retaliation by their peers, and they do not have to speak directly to an adult.

## PEER NOMINATIONS CAN HELP PROVIDE SCHOOL COUNSELORS WITH A LIST OF STUDENTS WHO MIGHT BE VICTIMS OF BULLYING.

A psychometric advantage of peer nominations is that they are based on multiple informants, rather than a single opinion. Students may be no more accurate in understanding the concept of bullying when reporting on peers than on themselves, but the use of multiple informants has the potential to improve the reliability and accuracy of the measurement. For example, Phillips and Cornell (2012) tested the accuracy of peer nominations in a sample of 1,178 middle school students. The 182 students with two or more nominations were interviewed by school counselors to confirm whether they were victims of bullying according to the Olweus (1996) definition. They found that the positive predictive value (PPV) of peer nominations ranged from 43% for two or more nominations to 90% for nine or more nominations. When the students confirmed by school counselors as victims of bullying were combined with students involved in a peer conflict that was not bullying, PPV was 59% for two or more nominations and rose to 82% for four or more nominations.

### Present Study

School counselors play an especially important role in efforts to reduce bullying because of their mission to promote healthy social and emotional development as well as academic suc-

cess (Jacobsen & Bauman, 2007). In a survey of school counselor responses to bullying, Jacobsen and Bauman (2007) concluded that school counselors were appropriately responsive to the problem of bullying but needed training in effective intervention strategies. Bauman, Rigby, and Hoppa (2008) compared teacher and school counselor strategies for handling bullying and found that school counselors

were less inclined than teachers to ignore bullying and more interested in working with the victim. Teachers were more likely to favor punitive disciplinary actions against the perpetrator of bullying. Because of the serious social and emotional consequences of peer victimization, school counselors are increasingly called upon to deal with the problem of school bullying (D'Esposito, Blake, & Riccio, 2011). In response, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2015) offers Bullying Prevention Specialist training and other resources. However, interventions depend on the detection of bullying, which is why a peer nomination survey can be helpful.

The purpose of the present study was to describe the use of peer nominations to identify victims of bullying as part of a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students program to reduce bullying. The Phillips and Cornell study (2012) examined the use of peer nominations in a single middle school with grades 6-8. The present study built upon the Phillips and Cornell study (2012) in four ways. First, it expanded the peer nomination process to 29 schools that included elementary, middle, and high schools. Bullying is observed across all grades, so the peer nomination process was extended to grades 3-12, recognizing that students in younger grades would find a written survey too difficult.

Second, the study collected data from students about their reactions to the peer nomination survey. Previous studies have not examined how students react to the peer nominations. The authors felt that students' understanding of what they were being asked to do and comfort with the process was important.

## INTERVENTIONS DEPEND ON THE DETECTION OF BULLYING, WHICH IS WHY A PEER NOMINATION SURVEY CAN BE HELPFUL.

Third, the study compared online versus paper-and-pencil survey methods using a randomized design. In addition to being a more efficient way to collect data, an online survey permits the use of online videos to provide directions for the survey. A randomized, controlled study found that an educational video about the power imbalance requirement for bullying produced lower self-reports of bullying (Baly & Cornell, 2011). Accordingly, the present study randomly assigned classrooms to complete either a paper-and-pencil survey or an online survey that was enhanced with an educational video that explained the definition of bullying and encouraged student participation in the peer nomination process. Fourth, the study collected follow-up data on the students who were confirmed as victims of bullying by their school counselors.

The study examined four research questions. First, how do students respond to being asked to identify victims of bullying? This research question included asking students whether they understood the definition of bullying used in the survey, understood the purpose of the survey, felt comfortable completing it, and believed that it would help victims of bullying.

The second research question asked whether students responded differently to paper and pencil versus online versions of the survey. The online version permitted use of an introductory video

intended to enhance student engagement in the process. Because previous studies have found differences in bullying associated with student characteristics of gender, race/ethnicity, and school level (Juvonen & Graham, 2014), these variables were included as covariates in the analyses.

A third research question concerned

whether students nominated by their peers would be confirmed as victims of bullying by school counselors. Of particular interest was how the positive predictive value changed as the number of peer nominations increased.

The fourth research question investigated the status of the student victims after they were identified. The school counselors conducted a one-month follow-up interview with confirmed victims of bullying to assess whether the bullying had persisted. Findings from this phase of the study are regarded as exploratory because the study was not designed to investigate the intervention.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 29 schools (23 elementary, 3 middle, and 3 high schools) in two school systems participated in the study. These schools were selected because they received a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) that implemented a program to reduce bullying. The schools were located in central Virginia in an area of approximately 700 square miles that included schools in a small city, surrounding suburbs, and rural areas. The schools served a population of approximately 18,000 students with 35% eligible for free or reduced price meals and a racial/eth-

nic distribution of 61% White, 17% Black, 11% Hispanic, 5 Asian, and 6% Other or two or more groups.

All students in grades 3-12 who were able to read English and complete the survey were eligible for participation. Because the survey was administered as a routine part of the school's bullying prevention program, active parental consent was not required. Parents were informed about the study by a letter from the school principal and given the option to decline participation. Out of 9,594 students in grades 3-12, 8,302 students completed the survey for a participation rate of 87%. Of the responding students, 7,889 had complete data (95%). According to school authorities, few parents declined participation, but the primary reason for nonparticipation was difficulty scheduling time for the survey to be completed. Participation rates were higher for elementary (94%) and middle (91%) schools than high schools (77%), primarily because the high schools reported more difficulty finding time to schedule students to complete the survey. Approximately half the respondents were girls (51%) and 63% were White, 14% were Black, 8% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian, and 11% identified themselves as belonging to another group or two or more racial/ethnic groups (see Table 1).

### Measures

Students completed a peer nomination survey that has been used in several previous studies (Branson & Cornell, 2009; Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004; Phillips & Cornell, 2012). These studies found that peer nominations were significantly correlated with self-reports of bullying victimization in independent samples. Moreover, one study found that peer nominations were predictive of student self-reports of depression and lower GPA and made a statistically significant incremental contribution to the prediction of both depression and GPA beyond the contribution of self-reported victimization (Branson & Cornell, 2009).

The survey presented a standard written definition of bullying: "Bul-

TABLE 1

## SAMPLE SIZE BY SURVEY FORMAT, RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER, AND SCHOOL LEVEL (N = 7,889)

	Paper-pencil		Online		Total <i>n</i>	%
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Total	3,931		3,958		7,889	
Race/Ethnicity						
White	2,513	63.9%	2,486	62.8%	4,999	63.4%
Black	535	13.6%	536	13.5%	1,071	13.6%
Hispanic	266	6.8%	359	9.1%	625	7.9%
Asian	161	4.1%	179	4.5%	340	4.3%
Other race/ethnicity	456	11.6%	398	10.1%	854	10.8%
Gender						
Boy	1,920	48.8%	1,971	49.8%	3,891	49.3%
Girl	2,011	51.2%	1,987	50.2%	3,998	50.7%
School level						
Elementary	1,689	43.0%	1,661	42.0%	3,350	42.5%
Middle	805	20.5%	926	23.4%	1,731	21.9%
High	1,437	36.6%	1,371	34.6%	2,808	35.6%

lying is defined as the use of one's strength or popularity to injure, threaten, or embarrass another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. Physical bullying is when a student hits, kicks, grabs, or shoves you on purpose. Verbal bullying is when a student threatens or teases you in a hurtful way. Social bullying is when a student tries to keep others from being your friend or from letting you join in what they are doing. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength argue or fight" (Cornell, 2015). Next, students were asked to identify victims of bullying in their school, "Based on this definition of bullying, write the names of any students who have been bullied at school during the past month. If you are not sure of the student's full name, give some way to identify the student, such as the student's bus number, grade, or teacher's name. Please do not list someone's name as a joke, because this prevents us from working with students who need help."

Students reported their grade, gender, and race. In order to assess their reactions to the survey, we developed four statements for students to rate: (a) I understand the definition

## THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF STUDENTS (91%) INDICATED THAT THEY FELT COMFORTABLE WITH THE PEER NOMINATION PROCEDURE.

of bullying used in this survey; (b) I understand the purpose of this survey; (c) I believe that this survey will help victims of bullying at this school; and (d) I am comfortable completing this survey. The four statements were answered *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree*.

### Procedures

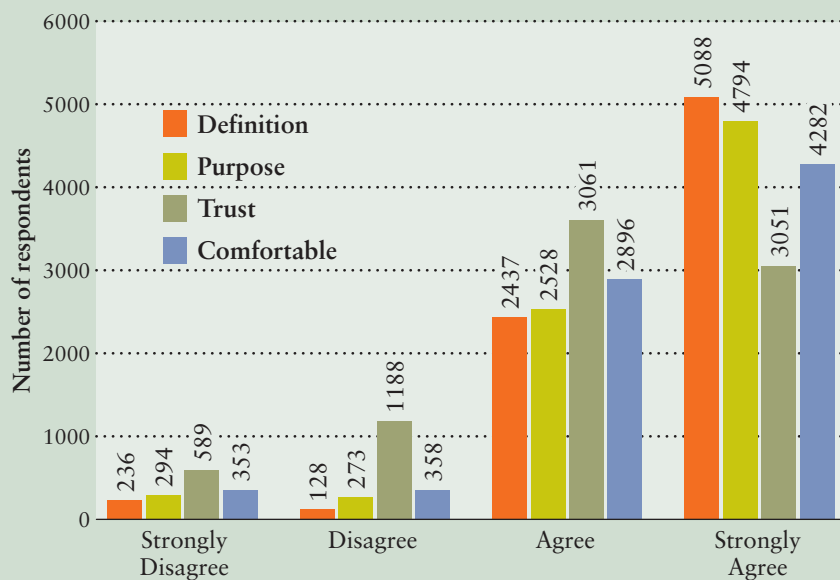
In each school, a school administrator identified the class periods when the survey could be administered. During this class period, all of the classrooms within each grade were randomly assigned to take the survey online or by paper and pencil. Teachers or other school staff members supervised the administration and followed a standard set of instructions.

Students in the online condition completed the surveys in classrooms equipped with computers. At the outset of the survey, they watched a 3-minute video in which boy and girl narrators explained the definition of

bullying while student actors demonstrated cyber, verbal, and physical bullying (Virginia Youth Violence Project, 2012). The video was developed by the research team and a film company, and is available to the public on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6lBeN8OmS4>). At the conclusion of the video, the narrators asked students to complete the peer nomination survey. Students in the paper-and-pencil condition received the same standard instructions from the teacher, but completed the survey without a video.

School counselors reviewed the peer nominations and counted how many nominations each student received. Students with three or more nominations were interviewed by a school counselor to assess whether the student was actually a victim of bullying. The decision to interview students with three or more nominations was based on a practical judgment by school authorities that they could not

**FIGURE 1** DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES TO FOUR SURVEY QUESTIONS ( $n = 7,889$ )



**ALTOGETHER, 76% OF THE STUDENTS WERE IDENTIFIED AS INVOLVED IN SOME FORM OF PEER AGGRESSION . . . THESE ARE STUDENTS WHO MERIT CONCERN.**

interview all nominated students and on consideration of previous research. Notably, Phillips and Cornell (2012) found that three or more nominations identified 73% of the students who were either involved in bullying or involved in another form of peer conflict. School counselors agreed that identifying students in either group was worthwhile. School personnel are frequently called upon to distinguish a reported case of bullying from ordinary peer conflict in anti-bullying intervention programs (e.g., Kärnä et al., 2013). A previous study tested the feasibility of the peer nomination and interview process, and identified some guidelines for school counselors in doing the interviews (Phillips & Cornell, 2012). Based on these results, the researchers provided the school counselors in the present study with an instructional video explaining how they should interview students and what criteria they should use in deciding whether a student was a victim of bullying. These criteria aligned with the definition of bullying and required

that a power imbalance exist between aggressor and victim that distinguished bullying from ordinary peer conflict. The bullying also must have occurred within the past 30 days to be considered an active case of bullying. Cases were classified as (a) victim of bullying, (b) former victim of bullying, (c) peer conflict that was not bullying, (d) joke nomination, or (e) other or unknown status. The video included a series of vignettes in which school counselors interviewed teenage actors who had been nominated by their peers as victims of bullying. To assess the inter-rater reliability of this coding system, 30 school counselors independently reviewed seven case examples. The school counselors achieved an average of 91 percent agreement (range 70 to 100) with the correct classification. Inter-rater reliability was computed using Fleiss' Kappa (Fleiss, Nee, & Landis, 1979) since multiple raters were using nominal scales. Fleiss' Kappa was .81, which indicated an excellent level of agreement based on Landis and Koch's (1977) guidelines.

When a student was identified as a victim of bullying, school counselors followed their regular counseling procedures to assist the student. Depending on the individual circumstances, the school counselor might provide supportive counseling, identify and intervene with the individuals responsible for the bullying, and/or contact parents. School counselor actions were not part of the study and were not examined. Approximately 30 days after the first interview, however, school counselors conducted a follow-up interview with the student and assessed whether the bullying had stopped.

### Analysis Plan

The four survey statements were dichotomized into agree (agree and strongly agree coded as 1) and disagree (disagree and strongly disagree coded as 0) because the data were severely skewed (see Figure 1) and non-interval in nature (e.g., the one point difference between strongly disagree and disagree is not necessarily the same as the one point difference between disagree and agree). Logistic regression models were used to predict the log odds of student agreement (agree versus disagree) with each of the four statements as the dependent variables (i.e., comfortable taking survey, understand definition of bullying, understand purpose of survey, and trust survey will help victims). As the main independent variable, the authors included a dichotomous variable (1 = online versus 0 = paper-pencil surveys) to investigate whether there were differences between the two randomly-assigned administration conditions. Additional dummy-coded control variables for gender and race/ethnicity (with White as the reference group) were included in all models. The analyses used a school fixed-effect approach (Allison, 2009; Murnane & Willet, 2011) that controlled for all observed and unobserved school-level variables and accounted for the clustered nature of the data using  $J - 1$  dummy codes where  $J =$  number of schools. A fixed effect approach to account for the clustering is appropriate when researchers are interested

primarily in level-one dependent and independent variables while accounting for level-two (i.e., school level) variability (Huang, 2014).

The choice to dichotomize the responses was based on conceptual, practical, and statistical reasons. As the authors' primary interest was to identify students who agreed versus disagreed with the statements, the use of dichotomization was based on a clear cut point and they did not use an arbitrary mean or median split which has been known to be problematic (MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002). Second, even though Likert scales have often been treated as interval data (Jamieson, 2004), they are not equal interval scales. G6b, McCollin, and Ramalhoto (2007) stated, "proper ordinal approaches [in the analysis of Likert scales] are in the minority." Last, other approaches such as chi-square analysis or ordered logistic regression were possible, although logistic regression could answer the research questions parsimoniously, include controls, and account for the nested nature of the data. Data were also nonnormal (as shown in Figure 1) and had fewer than five response categories, a number that is often used as a cutoff point when data can be treated as normally distributed (e.g., Finney & DiStefano, 2006). Using logistic regression makes conceptual sense, is readily understood, and does not result in model violations (e.g., heteroscedasticity of residuals) which may result in questionable analyses and biased standard errors. As an additional specification check, the authors also ran models treating the outcomes as continuous variables using fixed effect ordinary least squares regression and found a similar pattern of results.

## RESULTS

The first research question concerned student reactions to the survey. Students gave largely positive responses to the four survey statements (see Figure 1), with the overwhelming majority

agreeing or strongly agreeing that they understood the definition of bullying (95%) and the purpose of the survey (93%), and felt comfortable completing it (91%), although a lower percentage trusted that the survey would help victims of bullying (77%). The first set of analyses compared the online versus paper-and-pencil conditions. Table 1 presents a breakdown of respondents by survey format, race/ethnicity, gender, and school level. The distribution of participants between the two conditions (online versus paper-and-pencil) was approximately equal.

The second question concerned differences between the paper-and-pencil and online versions of the survey. Logistic regression analyses (see Table 2) found no statistically significant association between survey condition and response to the four survey statements, with one exception: Elementary school students in the online survey condition were more likely than elementary students in the paper-and-pencil condition to report understanding the definition of bullying by a factor of 1.71 (or 71% higher odds,  $p < .01$ ), while controlling for race/ethnicity and gender.

Logistic regressions also indicated that Black students across grade levels felt less comfortable than White students in completing the survey (ORs = 0.43 - 0.69), while controlling for gender and survey format. In addition, Black students reported lower agreement that they understood

to investigate whether school level (dummy coded with high school as the reference group) was associated with the likelihood of agreeing to the four survey questions. Results indicated that elementary and middle school students differed on only one of the four questions as shown by non-overlapping confidence intervals for their estimates: middle school students were less likely than elementary school students (77% versus 89%) to trust that the survey would help victims of bullying. Differences between high-school students and both elementary and middle school students were all statistically significant (all  $ps < .05$ ); high school students endorsed lower agreement for all four survey statements and indicated the lowest agreement for trusting that the survey would help other victims of bullying (66%).

The third research question investigated whether students nominated as victims of bullying by their peers would be confirmed as victims by the school counselors. Respondents nominated 492 students three or more times as a victim of bullying (see Table 3). The school counselor interviews confirmed that 128 (26%) of these students were identified as victims of bullying, 92 (19%) were identified as former victims of bullying, 152 (31%) were identified as involved in peer conflict that was not bullying, 26 (6%) claimed that their nominations were a joke by peers, and the status of 94 (19%) students had some other ex-

PEER NOMINATIONS REPRESENTS A MUCH MORE DIRECT EFFORT TO IDENTIFY VICTIMS OF BULLYING THAN . . . ANONYMOUS SELF-REPORT SURVEYS.

the definition of bullying (ORs = 0.29 - 0.47) compared to White students, holding all other variables in the model constant. Across grade levels as well, girls were more trusting than boys that the survey would help victims of bullying (ORs = 1.25 - 1.41).

A supplemental series of logistic regression analyses were conducted

planation or could not be determined. The school counselors suspected that some of the students in the latter group might be victims of bullying or peer conflict who were unwilling to disclose their situation and would not cooperate in the interview.

Although most of the students receiving three or more nominations

TABLE 2

## LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL ODDS RATIOS (WITH 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS) BY SCHOOL LEVEL

Variable	Elementary school (n = 3,350)				Middle school (n = 1,731)				High school (n = 2,808)			
	OR	SE	LB	UB	OR	SE	LB	UB	OR	SE	LB	UB
I feel comfortable completing this survey												
Online	1.06	0.14	0.82	1.36	1.05	0.19	0.74	1.50	0.80	0.10	0.63	1.03
Girl	1.03	0.13	0.80	1.31	1.55 *	0.28	1.08	2.21	1.40 **	0.18	1.09	1.79
Black	0.69 *	0.13	0.47	1.00	0.56 *	0.15	0.34	0.95	0.43 ***	0.07	0.31	0.60
Hispanic	0.80	0.19	0.51	1.27	0.43 **	0.13	0.24	0.79	0.37 ***	0.07	0.25	0.54
Asian	1.18	0.41	0.60	2.35	1.27	0.77	0.38	4.17	0.67	0.19	0.38	1.18
Other	0.85	0.16	0.58	1.24	0.85	0.30	0.43	1.69	0.35 ***	0.07	0.25	0.51
I understand the definition of bullying used in this survey												
Online	1.71 **	0.32	1.19	2.47	0.58	0.19	0.31	1.09	0.88	0.14	0.65	1.19
Girl	1.10	0.20	0.77	1.56	3.16 ***	1.08	1.62	6.20	1.46 *	0.23	1.08	1.97
Black	0.45 **	0.11	0.28	0.74	0.29 **	0.12	0.13	0.64	0.47 ***	0.10	0.32	0.70
Hispanic	0.58	0.21	0.29	1.16	0.35	0.24	0.09	1.37	1.06	0.29	0.61	1.83
Asian/Other <sup>a</sup>	0.85	0.24	0.49	1.48	0.70	0.44	0.20	2.41	0.35 ***	0.08	0.23	0.54
I trust that this survey will help victims of bullying at this school												
Online	0.98	0.11	0.79	1.22	1.08	0.13	0.86	1.35	1.16	0.09	0.99	1.35
Girl	1.41 **	0.16	1.13	1.75	1.37 **	0.16	1.09	1.72	1.25 **	0.10	1.07	1.46
Black	0.74	0.13	0.53	1.04	0.81	0.15	0.56	1.15	0.85	0.10	0.68	1.06
Hispanic	1.20	0.28	0.76	1.90	0.98	0.24	0.61	1.57	0.84	0.12	0.63	1.11
Asian	1.35	0.43	0.72	2.53	1.94	0.80	0.86	4.35	1.32	0.26	0.91	1.93
Other	0.80	0.13	0.58	1.11	0.68	0.14	0.45	1.02	0.66 **	0.09	0.51	0.86
I understand the purpose of this survey												
Online	1.32	0.21	0.97	1.79	1.02	0.23	0.65	1.60	1.09	0.14	0.86	1.40
Girl	1.31	0.20	0.97	1.77	2.56 ***	0.63	1.58	4.14	1.39 **	0.17	1.09	1.78
Black	0.57 *	0.13	0.37	0.88	0.82	0.28	0.42	1.62	0.55 ***	0.09	0.40	0.77
Hispanic	0.42 ***	0.10	0.26	0.67	0.89	0.40	0.36	2.17	0.53 **	0.11	0.35	0.80
Asian	0.89	0.35	0.41	1.93	1.24	0.92	0.29	5.31	0.66	0.19	0.38	1.15
Other	0.80	0.19	0.50	1.27	0.71	0.28	0.33	1.54	0.34 ***	0.06	0.24	0.48

Notes. N = 7,889. All models used school fixed effects which accounted for the nested data structure. OR = odds ratio. LB = lower bound and UB = upper bound of 95% confidence intervals. The reference group was composed of White boys taking the paper-and-pencil survey. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Question responses were coded 1=agree/strongly agree, 0=disagree/strongly disagree.

<sup>a</sup>Asian and other race/ethnicity were combined to allow the model to converge for this question.



TABLE 3

## NUMBER OF PEER NOMINATIONS AND SCHOOL COUNSELOR DETERMINATION OF VICTIM STATUS

Nominations	School counselor Determination						Positive Predictive Value		
	Victim of bullying	Former victim of bullying	Peer conflict that was not bullying	Nominated as a joke	Other	Total	Victims of bullying	Victims and former victims of bullying	Victims, former victims of bullying, and peer conflict cases
3 or more	128	92	152	26	94	492	26.02	44.72	75.61
4 or more	97	59	81	12	45	294	32.99	53.06	80.61
5 or more	71	37	43	7	27	185	38.38	58.38	81.62
6 or more	60	25	34	5	18	142	42.25	59.86	83.80
7 or more	46	19	19	2	12	98	46.94	66.33	85.71
8 or more	37	13	16	2	8	76	48.68	65.79	86.84
9 or more	25	9	10	0	7	51	49.02	66.67	86.27

Note. Positive predictive value is number of students determined by the school counselor divided by the total number of students receiving that many or more nominations.

were not confirmed by school counselors as current victims of bullying, the school counselors noted that identifying students who were former victims of bullying was valuable because the negative consequences of bullying tend to be persistent (Swearer et al., 2010), thus these students might still merit intervention. Potential value also existed in identifying students who were involved in a peer conflict that was not bullying but nevertheless raised concern among their friends. Accordingly, the PPV was calculated for two successively more inclusive groups: (a) adding former victims of bullying, and (b) adding students who were involved in some form of peer conflict. Figure 2 displays the PPV for these three groups.

Students who were confirmed as bullying victims had a higher number of peer nominations ( $M = 6.62$ ,  $SD = 5.09$ ) compared to unconfirmed victims ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 3.21$ ),  $t(164) = 4.03$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.27$ . The number of nominations was independent of the type of survey method used (i.e., online or paper-pencil) based on the results of a paired sample  $t$  test,  $t(127) = 0.45$ ,  $p = .66$ .

The fourth research question concerned the status of students after they had been identified as victims of bully-

## A PEER NOMINATION PROCEDURE ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO SEEK HELP AND GIVES STUDENTS A WAY TO BREAK THE CODE OF SILENCE AROUND BULLYING.

ing. Follow-up interviews one month after the initial counselor interviews were conducted with 102 out of the 128 identified bully victims (26 students had no follow-up data). Of the 102 students, 71 (70%) of the students were no longer being bullied.

## DISCUSSION

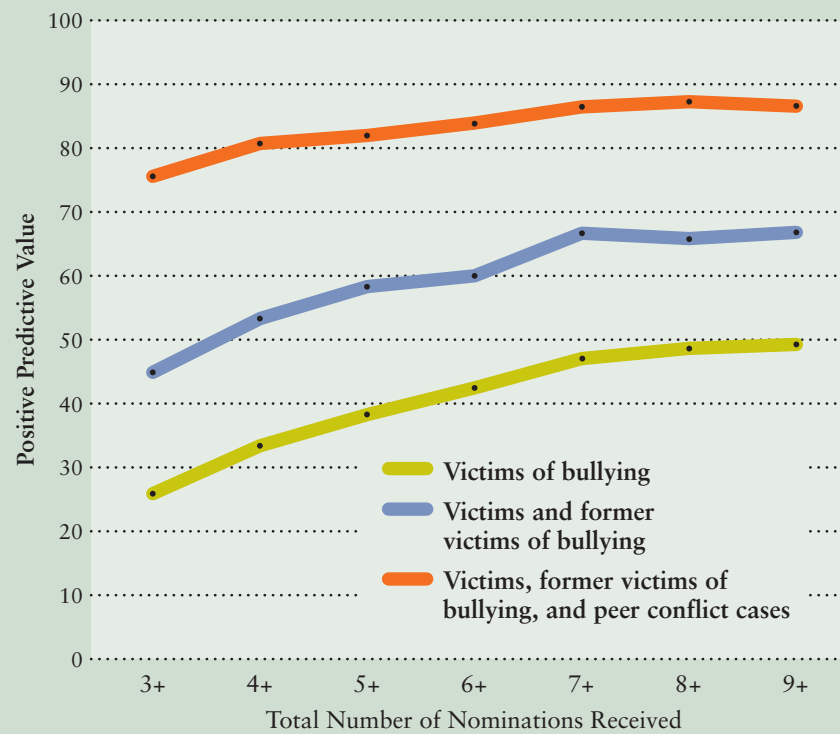
This study examined the viability of a peer nomination survey and interview procedure to identify victims of bullying. The first research question concerned how students responded to the peer nomination survey. The overwhelming majority of students (91%) indicated that they felt comfortable with the peer nomination procedure. This should offer some reassurance to school authorities and Institutional Review Boards concerned about the sensitivity of peer nominations. Anecdotally, the peer nomination process was conducted without difficulty other than the logistic challenges of schedul-

ing students to complete a survey. One of the participating middle schools has been conducting peer nominations annually for 10 years as part of its anti-bullying program and has not found the process to be disturbing or troubling to students.

In answer to the second research question, the study found that there was little difference between results for the paper-and-pencil survey and the online survey. The only statistically significant difference was that the elementary students reported greater understanding of the definition of bullying in the online condition which included an educational video about bullying. Since the online survey video encouraged student participation in the peer nomination process, there was some reason to expect that the enhanced procedure would be more appealing to students.

Although responses to the survey questions were generally positive and largely consistent across student subgroups, several notable differences

**FIGURE 2** POSITIVE PREDICTIVE VALUE OF PEER NOMINATIONS TO IDENTIFY VICTIMIZATION STATUS ( $n = 492$ )



## STUDENT REPORTS SHOULD BE REGARDED AS A SCREENING PROCEDURE THAT REQUIRES CAREFUL FOLLOW-UP AND CONFIRMATION.

did appear. High school students were less sanguine about the survey than elementary and middle school students, especially with regard to trusting that the survey would help victims of bullying. These differences seem consistent with the increasing independence and decreasing interest in seeking help from adults that is common among adolescents (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Oliver & Candappa, 2007).

Girls reported greater trust than boys that the survey would be helpful to victims, which is consistent with studies reporting that girls are more willing than boys to seek help for bullying (Eliot et al., 2010). Another difference is that Black students felt less comfortable completing the survey and reported lower agreement that they understood the definition of bullying compared to White students. There is no obvious explanation for

these findings, although Sawyer, Bradshaw, and O'Brennan (2008) reported that Black students were less likely to report being a victim of bullying using a definition-based measure, even when they acknowledged peer victimization experiences. They offered the hypothesis that cultural differences in how victimization experiences are perceived affect willingness to report them as bullying. Interview studies might shed light on racial and cultural differences in how bullying is defined and the nature of any barriers to seeking help from school authorities.

### School Counselor Confirmation of Peer Nominations

The third question investigated whether students nominated by their peers would be confirmed as victims of bullying by school counselors. This process identified 492 students with three or more nominations as possible

victims of bullying. School counselors who interviewed these students found that only 26% were currently being bullied according to a strict definition of bullying that required a power imbalance between victim and aggressor. Another 19% were identified as former victims of bullying who had not been bullied in the past month, and still another 31% were classified as involved in a peer conflict that was not bullying. Altogether, 76% of the students were identified as involved in some form of peer aggression. The peer nomination procedure identified a mixed group of students involved in either bullying or some other form of peer conflict. In either case, these are students who merit concern and investigation.

This procedure may not identify some victims of bullying, either because they were not nominated at least three times or they deceived the school counselor who interviewed them. From this perspective, peer nominations cannot be regarded as a comprehensive identification procedure, but it represents a much more direct effort to identify victims of bullying than the pervasive school practice of anonymous self-report surveys. At present, schools have little means of systematically identifying victims of bullying and rely on more haphazard methods such as investigating suspicious behavior or relying on students who occasionally come forward to seek help for themselves or others. A peer nomination procedure encourages students to seek help and gives students a way to break the code of silence around bullying without identifying themselves.

It is possible that a more detailed definition of bullying might have helped students make nominations that were more consistent with the school counselor judgments. For example, perhaps the students could have identified fewer students who were involved in peer conflict that was not bullying. However, an alternative view is that students are not strongly influenced by the definitions of bullying presented in surveys and rely more intuitively on their own conception of bullying. Research on student self-reports of

bullying have found similar tendencies among students to ignore the power imbalance requirement (Baly & Cornell, 2011; Green et al., 2013; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014). School counselors have found that students use the term more inclusively even when presented with a narrow definition of bullying (Cornell & Mehta, 2011; Phillips & Cornell, 2012). Huang and Cornell (2015) conducted a randomized experiment in which 17,301 students in 119 high schools were asked about bullying victimization with or without a prior written definition of bullying. The use of a survey definition of bullying had no effect on school prevalence rates.

Over-inclusiveness is not entirely disadvantageous because school counselors are interested in identifying students who are involved in peer conflicts that are not bullying. Ybarra and colleagues (2014) found that victims of peer aggression generally experienced impairments in daily functioning whether or not they were technically victims of bullying, although those who met the power imbalance criteria for bullying appeared to have greater impairment.

Student surveys, whether self-report or peer report, are a widely used and highly convenient method of measuring the prevalence of bullying, but there has been little study of their correspondence with independent criteria such as school counselor judgments. In light of the findings from research on the definition of bullying, as well as the results from this study, there is an apparent need to establish the accuracy of student report measures of bullying. The present study was designed to detect errors of over-inclusion and could not detect under-inclusion, although it seems likely that some victims were not identified. The authors caution that student reports should be regarded as a screening procedure that requires careful follow-up and confirmation. Peer nominations are especially valuable because they give school authorities the names of possible victims and this can facilitate efforts to help bullied students and reduce bullying. More systematic

study is needed to determine whether a peer nomination process can be an effective supplement to established anti-bullying programs. Since many anti-bullying programs encourage bystander actions to stop bullying, a peer reporting system might be especially useful, particularly in cases where the bystanders are hesitant to take overt action and prefer to remain anonymous.

## USE OF A PEER NOMINATION SURVEY SENDS A STRONG MESSAGE THAT SCHOOL AUTHORITIES ARE CONCERNED ABOUT BULLYING AND WANT TO HELP.

In answer to the fourth research question, the study found that 70% of the students identified as victims of bullying were no longer being bullied at the one-month follow-up. This is an encouraging finding that supports the idea that a peer nomination process might facilitate anti-bullying efforts. However, this is an exploratory observation that must be offered with caution, since the study did not undertake an examination of counseling interventions or show how those interventions could have been related to the cessation of bullying. There was no comparison group and the bullying could have ceased for other reasons, or the students could have denied that they were still being bullied. A more systematic study of counseling interventions and outcomes is needed.

### Limitations

One important limitation of this study is the reliance on school counselor judgments to determine whether students were victims of bullying. Some students may have been defensive or unwilling to report their victim experiences, and some victims of bullying may have received fewer than three nominations. The authors make no claim that three nominations is the standard cutoff that all schools should use, because the decision on a cutoff will be based on both empirical and practical considerations. Arguably, a school might interview all students with even one nomination, but

from a practical perspective, schools are unlikely to have the human resources to devote to this process. The goal for this paper was to stimulate more research on the use of peer nominations and to encourage schools to begin using peer nominations, regardless of the cutoff they use.

From a strictly measurement perspective, the cutoff might vary as

a function of the size of the school or its level (elementary, middle, or high). Large schools might have more students with three or more nominations than small schools. However, school counselors may have legitimate concern for students who are nominated three times (or some other cutoff) regardless of school size. To address this issue empirically, a future study would need a sufficiently large sample of schools with varying enrollment to control for school level, because elementary schools tend to be smaller than secondary schools.

An underlying problem is that research on bullying generally has no gold standard for identifying students as true victims of bullying. Most studies rely on student reports at face value, although research on student conceptions of bullying makes this a questionable assumption (Baly & Cornell, 2011; Cornell & Mehta, 2011, Green et al., 2013; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014). Even the order of questions used in self-report bullying surveys has been found to have an effect on victimization rates (Huang & Cornell, 2015). Although both self-report and peer report methods rely on student judgment, peer nominations can be investigated, whereas anonymous self-reports cannot.

The correspondence between peer and self-reports of bullying remains elusive. Previous studies using a confidential, but not anonymous, self-

report survey could compare student and peer reports. Lee and Cornell (2010) found that peer and self-reports were moderately correlated ( $r = .42$ ), which is similar to the correlations (.32) obtained by both Pellegrini (2001) and Branson and Cornell (2009). Baly et al. (2014) undertook a 3-year longitudinal comparison of peer and self-reports of bullying for 382 students repeatedly assessed in grades 6-8. Victimization by both methods varied substantially over the three years, with correlations of .15 to .25. Despite their modest correspondence, two studies have concluded that both peer and self-reported victimization are useful predictors of student outcomes and may tap somewhat different subgroups of victims (Baly et al., 2014; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2001).

Like most school climate and bullying surveys, the peer nomination survey was administered only once per year, and purposely asked about events in the past 30 days in order to focus on recent incidents. For these reasons, the survey would not detect bullying at other times during the year. More frequent administration would raise resistance that the process took too much time away from instruction. However, a single school-wide administration could have a lasting effect if it brings attention to the problem of bullying and increases the willingness of students to report bullying or seek help for bullying on their own later in the year. The activity of counselors contacting students and actively working to resolve bullying over a period of weeks or months could also convey a strong message of concern and support to students that has sustained effects. These are areas for further study.

### Implications for School Counselors

Although the findings of this study require replication, the research has implications for school counseling practice. School counselors can play a critical role in efforts to reduce school bullying. Their training, expertise, and professional role make them well suited to help students resolve inter-

personal conflicts and increase their understanding and tolerance of others.

The findings of this study provide school counselors with a practical method for identifying victims of bullying or other forms of peer conflict. A brief survey of students can identify victims of bullying much more quickly than other methods. It is important, however, for counselors to use the nomination process as a screening procedure and to interview the student to confirm whether he or she is being bullied or victimized in some other way. The training interview used by school counselors in the present study is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCeV3qJL7IU>.

The peer nomination method is a more comprehensive and efficient method than conventional anonymous surveys, but its novelty and directness may elicit some concerns by school staff or parents who are unfamiliar with the process. School counselors may need to explain the process carefully to stakeholders in advance and build administrative and staff support before proceeding with the survey. The results of this study may help to assuage concerns. Ultimately, the success of the first survey will determine whether the process becomes a regular part of the school's anti-bullying efforts.

One advantage of the peer nomination survey is that it can be used to supplement other forms of intervention. Schools using a school-wide program such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention program (Hazelden, 2014) can benefit from a peer nomination survey to accelerate the intervention process. Schools that have an anonymous school climate survey or bullying self-report survey can append a peer nomination question to their existing survey. More broadly, the use of a peer nomination survey sends a strong, school-wide message that school authorities are concerned about bullying and want to help.

Explaining the purpose of the survey to students will be important, which is why the student video was devel-

oped and made available on YouTube. School counselors may prefer to produce their own video or encourage their students to take the lead in creating a video or some other way to facilitate the survey. However, this study found that a paper-and-pencil administration without an explanatory video produced satisfactory results and no difference in the number of nominations.

In any survey administration, some reservations about the survey are likely and some students will not be engaged. A few students will not take the survey seriously and might provide nonsensical or cynical answers. The virtue of the nomination process, however, is that full student participation is not necessary. It only takes a few students to nominate someone as a possible victim of bullying, and it rests with the school counselor to interview the student and assess the student's status and need for intervention. In this respect, the process is no different than if a student was reported to be a victim of bullying by a parent or teacher. The follow-up process relies on the skills and practices that the school counselor already uses in working with student conflicts and concerns.

The issue of protecting students from bullying has become a national policy concern (Cornell & Limber, 2015). In a series of Dear Colleague letters sent to schools across the nation, the U.S. Department of Education has pointed out that some forms of bullying constitute discriminatory harassment under federal law. Specifically, bullying of an individual based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability can be a civil rights violation if it is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent that it interferes with a student's ability to benefit from the school's services (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2010). Another letter advised that the Title IX protection against gender-based harassment would include students harassed on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation (U. S. Department of Education, Office for Civil

Rights, 2011). This is important because sexual minority students report high levels of bullying (Olsen, Kann, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & McManus, 2014). A third letter from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) emphasized the obligation to prevent the bullying of students with disabilities. According to OSERS, “whether or not the bullying is related to the students’ disability, any bullying of a student with a disability that results in the student not receiving meaningful educational benefit constitutes a denial of FAPE under the IDEA that must be remedied” (U. S. Department of Education, OSERS, 2013, p. 2).

The simple act of disciplining a student for bullying is probably not sufficient to meet federal expectations. When bullying constitutes a federal civil rights violation, the school must go beyond stopping the bullying behavior to “eliminate any hostile environment and its effects” as well as take steps to “prevent the harassment from recurring” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2010, pp. 2-3). These goals imply a broad and sustained effort to improve the school climate. More generally, the OCR encouraged schools to conduct staff training on the school’s civil rights obligations, to have clear policies and procedures in place, and to make sure that students and families know how to seek help for harassment (Cornell & Limber, 2015). School counselors can play a key role in helping to assure that schools meet federal standards and expectations for a healthy school climate free from harassment and hostility.

## CONCLUSION

This study builds upon two prior studies of school counselor identification of bully victims (Cornell & Mehta, 2011; Phillips & Cornell, 2012) in several ways. First, the study uses a much larger sample of 7,889 students drawn from 29 schools and spanning grades 3-12. Second, this is the first study

to report how students felt about the peer nomination process and to show positive reactions across two forms of survey administration. Last, the study breaks new ground in reporting how quickly the bullying ended in most cases after the school counselors identified the victims. There is an important need for further work to document the effectiveness of counselor interventions after bullying has been uncovered.

Meta-analyses indicate that school anti-bullying programs are in need of improvement because they typically reduce bullying by only about 20 percent (Tofsi & Farrington, 2011). Although more research is needed, this study demonstrated that peer nominations could be used to identify victims of bullying in grades 3-12 in a large sample of 7,889 students. Students responded positively to the procedure across two forms of administration. A peer nomination strategy might be useful in augmenting anti-bullying programs because it allows school counselors to identify and intervene with victims of bullying, overcoming the code of silence and reluctance to seek help that is commonly observed in anti-bullying efforts. Peer nominations have an important advantage over self-report because a peer report of bullying victimization can be investigated and confirmed. ■

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