

## THE PREVALENCE OF BULLYING AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Andreea-Maria STICEA<sup>1\*</sup> , Adrian COJOCARIU<sup>2</sup> 

**ABSTRACT. Introduction:** Bullying is a widespread phenomenon among school populations, including in Romania. **Objective:** We aimed to determine the prevalence of bullying among primary school students, with a focus on the distribution of roles (victim, aggressor, victim-aggressor, uninvolved) and possible gender differences. **Material and Methods:** The study employed a cross-sectional design. The research sample consisted of 352 fourth-grade students from 7 schools. Data were collected by one of the researchers during physical education classes, using the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument Bully/Target. The Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument Bully/Target is composed of 36 items that assess the two dimensions of bullying (perpetration and victimization) through a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = several times a week, and 6 = daily. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20. **Results:** The findings showed that 48.3% of students were not involved in bullying, 28.7% were victims, 6.5% were aggressors, and 16.5% were victim-aggressors. The prevalence of bullying by gender was comparable. **Conclusions:** The study highlighted the magnitude of bullying from primary school age, as well as the need for early prevention programs. Interventions should adopt an integrative perspective, addressing all roles involved in the bullying cycle.

**Keywords:** bullying perpetration; victimization; primary school; prevalence; gender differences.

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral School in Sports and Physical Education Science, Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iași, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iași, Romania

\* Corresponding author: sticea\_andreea@yahoo.com



## INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a type of aggressive behavior that is perpetuated, or has a high likelihood of being perpetuated, by one or more individuals and is distinguished by a power imbalance, with the objective of causing physical, psychological, social, and/or educational harm (Gladden et al., 2014). Other authors state that there are three defining characteristics of the bullying phenomenon: the power imbalance, intention, and repetition (Olweus, 2010).

The phenomenon of bullying is widespread among the school population, including in Romania (UNESCO, 2019). Compared to the international literature, research of the bullying in Romanian schools is still at an early stage, particularly at the primary level.

The National Institute of Public Health conducted a nationwide study on a sample of 4,612 students regarding the prevalence of victimization at the national level and across different geographical regions. The research findings, published in the National Public Health Report on Children and Youth in Romania (2016), reveal that the incidence of victimization at the national level is 17.9%. With regard to the prevalence of victimization by geographical area, Transylvania records the highest percentage in the country, namely 25%, followed by Moldova with 18%, Banat with 17.4%, and Muntenia with 13.8%.

Cosma et al. (2015) conducted a study with a nationally representative sample of 4,882 students aged 10 to 16 and report that the prevalence of bullying perpetration is 30.8% among boys and 20.6% among girls. With regard to the prevalence of victimization, the authors report an incidence of 19.8% for boys and 13.9% for girls.

Bullying is also a widespread phenomenon within physical education classes (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2020; Wei & Graber, 2023).

In Canada, Hurley and Mandigo (2010) found that in a sample of 234 adolescents, 11.1% were victims of physical bullying, 13.6% were victims of verbal bullying, and 12.8% were victims of social bullying.

Gano-Overway (2013) conducted a study in the United States with a sample of 528 students aged between 10 and 15. The author reports that 15% of the students are perpetrators, while 28% are victims.

Bullying has a negative impact both during schooling and in adulthood, manifested in difficulties with concentration, lower academic performance, absenteeism, depression, suicidal thoughts, drug use, and risky or illegal behaviors (Copeland et al., 2013; Gardella et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2018; Ttofi et al., 2016; Turner et al., 2013; Wolke et al., 2013).

All of these issues cast doubt on the education and health of schoolchildren, future adults, and society as a whole. Therefore, investigating the phenomenon

of bullying becomes an urgent necessity, and taking into account scientific research, professional experiences, and the principle of prevention, we consider the final year of primary school to be a suitable choice for research.

Therefore, the present study aims to identify the prevalence of the bullying phenomenon among primary school students, with a focus on the distribution of roles (uninvolved, victim, perpetrator, bully-victim), as well as possible gender differences.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This study was conducted using a descriptive, cross-sectional design. A quantitative method was employed in order to achieve the research objective. More specifically, a questionnaire assessing bullying and victimization among primary school students was used.

### **Participants**

The research sample consisted of 352 students (174 boys and 178 girls) enrolled in the fourth grade during the 2024-2025 school year, coming from 7 schools.

The research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki for all participants. The study protocol received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, Faculty of Physical Education and Sport.

### **Procedure**

Following the review of the literature, an assessment instrument appropriate to the participants' age was selected for evaluating the two dimensions of bullying (perpetration and victimization). The questionnaire was administered by one of the study's researchers during physical education classes, between November 11, 2024, and December 17, 2024.

### **Materials**

To explore the prevalence of the bullying phenomenon among primary school students, we used the Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument Bully-Target (APRI-BT), developed by Parada (2000) and validated on the Romanian school population by Balan et al. (2022). The APRI-BT consists of 36 items designed to assess bullying and victimization in all three forms (physical, verbal, social). Responses are measured on a 6-point Likert scale, where: 1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = once a week, 5 = several times a week, 6 = daily. The scoring process yielded separate scores for each

form of bullying, each form of victimization, as well as a total for bullying behavior and one for victimization experience. The internal consistency of the scales ranges from 0.809 to 0.941.

### Data analysis

The statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20. A frequency analysis was conducted to identify the distribution of roles involved in the bullying phenomenon: uninvolved, victim, perpetrator, bully-victim.

## RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, our research indicates that, across the entire sample, 48.3% (170) of students are uninvolved in the bullying phenomenon, 28.7% (101) are victims, 6.5% (23) are perpetrators, and 16.5% (58) are bully-victims.

For the group of boys, the results show that 46.6% (81) are uninvolved, 28.2% (49) are victims, 7.5% (13) are perpetrators, and 17.8% (31) are bully-victims.

For the group of girls, we observed that 50% (89) are uninvolved, 29.2% (52) are victims, 5.6% (10) are perpetrators, and 15.2% (27) are bully-victims.

**Table 1.** The distribution of roles involved in the phenomenon of bullying

ROLE	TOTAL		BOYS		GIRLS	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Uninvolved</b>	170	48.3%	81	46.6%	89	50%
<b>Victim</b>	101	28.7%	49	28.2%	52	29.2%
<b>Perpetrator</b>	23	6.5%	13	7.5%	10	5.6%
<b>Bully-victim</b>	58	16.5%	31	17.8%	27	15.2%

## DISCUSSION

Our study shows that 28.7% of the participants are victims, 6.5% are perpetrators, and 16.5% are bully-victims. The percentage of students in a secondary role, classified as uninvolved, is 48.3%.

Gano-Overway (2013) identified a prevalence of 39% for victimization and 23% for bullying perpetration in a sample of 528 participants aged between 10 and 15 years. In our research, the prevalence is lower. The differences between studies can be explained by the frequency threshold used in case inclusion.

While in our study the responses considered ranged from at least once or twice a month to daily within the last two months (approximately, based on the school period during which the assessment was conducted), in that study all reported responses from at least once in the past month were included. The stricter threshold applied in our study may lead to a lower prevalence. This choice was based on one of the defining characteristics of bullying, namely repetition.

Gomes et al. (2022) found in a sample of 1,147 primary school students that 28.86% reported being victims, 6.89% reported being perpetrators, and 41.41% reported being bully-victims. We can observe percentages similar to those in our study regarding the roles of victim and perpetrator. However, the percentage of bully-victims is much higher in this study, a fact attributable to the methodology used.

Benítez-Sillero et al. (2024) reported a prevalence of 26% in a sample of 958 subjects aged between 12 and 18 years. In this study, the prevalence of victimization was 18%, the prevalence of bullying perpetration was 2%, and the percentage of those involved in both roles was 6%. A prevalence of 74% was identified among uninvolved students.

Thus, we can observe that our results indicate a higher prevalence regarding involvement in primary roles and a lower percentage of students involved in secondary roles. In both studies, approximately the same reference period (2 months) and a frequency threshold of at least once or twice a month were considered. Our results may suggest a higher prevalence, whether real or perceived differently, which can be explained by the different cultures to which the subjects belong. Romania is characterized by a predominantly collectivist culture, while Spain by an individualist culture. The prevalence of bullying perpetration is higher in countries with a collectivist culture, whereas the prevalence of victimization is higher in countries with an individualist culture. In countries characterized by individualism, girls experience victimization more frequently and are more likely to perpetrate social bullying, while boys are more involved in both dimensions of physical bullying (Felix & Green, 2010 cited by Balan et al., 2022). In countries characterized by collectivism, the percentage of victimization through all forms of bullying is higher among boys (Ji et al., 2016 cited by Balan et al., 2022).

According to the National Public Health Report on Children and Youth in Romania (2016), the prevalence of victimization recorded at the national level is 17.9%, while in Moldova it is 18%. Thus, we can note a higher prevalence in our research, which may suggest that, at the national level, the phenomenon has increased in recent years.

The study conducted by Cosma et al. (2015) shows that, at the national level, approximately 13.9% of girls and 19.8% of boys were victimized. Moreover, 20.6% of girls and 30.8% of boys perpetrated bullying.

In our study, the percentage of girls (29.2%) in the victim role is slightly higher compared to that of boys (28.2%), which contrasts with the results of the previous study. In addition, the prevalences identified in our sample are considerably higher. The percentage of boys in the perpetrator role (7.5%) is greater than that of girls (5.6%), which is consistent with the findings of the aforementioned research. However, significant differences can be observed regarding incidence, differences that can be explained at least partially by the fact that the previous study evaluated only the roles of victim and perpetrator, whereas our research also included the bully-victim role, with 17.8% of boys and 15.2% of girls falling into this category.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This research aimed to determine the prevalence of the bullying phenomenon among primary school students, with a focus on the distribution of roles, as well as the identification of gender differences.

Our study illustrated a high prevalence of involvement in bullying, confirming the magnitude of the phenomenon even at this age. The gender-based distribution revealed small differences, suggesting that bullying represents a problem common to both genders.

These findings support the importance of including anti-bullying intervention programs starting from the primary school level. Bullying is a cyclical phenomenon in which various forms of abusive behavior are perpetuated and tolerated within the social interactions among students – in our case, within a collectivist culture. Therefore, intervention programs could adopt an integrative perspective, focusing on all the roles involved in this abusive cycle.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

A.-M. STICEA and A. COJOCARIU contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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