



Girl-on-Girl Violence Report

Contra Costa County
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The Contra Costa Commission for Women

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About Us

The Contra Costa Commission for Women (CCCW) was formed in 1980 to both educate and advise the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors, as well as the community at large, on issues relating to the changing social and economic conditions of women in the area, with a particular focus on those who are economically disadvantaged.

Executive Summary

In the fall of 2008, CCCW conducted a study to learn about the nature of girl-on-girl violence in the high schools of Contra Costa County (County). The CCCW reached out to school districts located in East, Central and West Contra Costa, in the hopes of gathering pertinent information regarding girl-on-girl violence in high schools.

The principals of 43 high schools (Phase I), along with nine superintendents, were contacted across the County. A letter was sent to each asking specific questions on whether records were kept on incidents of girl-on-girl violence, and what resources were made available to victims (see Appendix A).

When the CCCW did not receive any responses, a follow-up letter was mailed out with a survey addressing bullying and violence (see Appendix B). Out of the 43 high schools and nine school districts, only three high schools (Freedom, De Anza and Riverside) responded with data. In addition to the high schools that were included in Phase I of the study, surveys from a group of young girls from Helms Middle School, along with some of their mothers, were included in Phase I's initial report. The young girls from Helms Middle School returned 37 surveys and four surveys were returned by mothers of students for a total of 41 surveys. A grand total of 44 surveys were used to compile the initial results of Phase I of this study in 2009.

After receiving the surveys from the initial report, the CCCW decided that the surveys received did not provide enough substantive information to complete the study, and to expand the project by adding additional phases to the study, which would target middle and elementary schools in order to generate a comprehensive survey of the County. The survey was expanded to include middle school administrators during Phase II and elementary school administrators in Phase III, due to the research from the initial report, which indicated that girl-on-girl violence starts at a much earlier age than high school. A new survey, developed as a part of Phase II, was sent to every middle school, and in Phase III a slightly revised survey was sent to every elementary school in Contra Costa County (see Appendices C and D).

In a further attempt to get a higher response rate, the CCCW put its survey online at www.surveymonkey.com. Surveymonkey.com is a free website which enables groups like CCCW to post a survey online and have school administrators answer it at their convenience. However, administrators were also given the option to mail or fax their responses back to the CCCW.

During Phase II, 15 of the 40 middle schools in the county turned in a survey (Delta Vista, Gale Ranch, Bristow, Los Cerros, Walnut Creek Intermediate, Dallas Ranch, Windemere Ranch, Black Diamond, Helms, Park, Lovonya Dejean, Valley View, Excelsior, and two additional schools which requested anonymity). Lastly, seven high schools responded to the survey: Monte Vista, John Swett, Miramonte, De Anza, Riverside, Freedom, and Las Lomas. All three of the high schools that responded to the initial attempt to collect high school data in the fall of 2008 responded again in 2009. The CCCW used the most recent responses in its analysis of the data. Four new high schools also responded with data during the second outreach effort to the high schools. When Phase III began, only 11 of 162 elementary schools in the

county responded with data (Walnut Acres, Indian Valley, Jack London, Montevideo, Fair Oaks, Valley Verde, Discovery Bay, Creekside, Marina Vista, Walnut Heights, and Stoneman). A grand total of 33 surveys were used when compiling the data.

The CCCW's goal after compiling the data from the surveys is to prepare a report outlining the findings with a final recommendation and a statement of future plans. In 2011, the CCCW hopes to continue its study of girl-on-girl violence by holding forums and workshops to educate the community about this issue. These forums will be targeted towards students, parent groups, teachers, and school administrators with the goals of creating awareness and retrieving more data regarding the issue of girl-on-girl violence. A special questionnaire will be designed for students of different age levels, to be distributed at these forums, and an additional questionnaire will be made for parents and other adults (school staff, public at large, etc.). The current survey (see Appendix C) will continue to be used for school administrators and teachers to obtain up-to-date data about this type of violence. Aside from the input of the girls at Helms Middle School from the initial Phase I report, students and parental feedback on the issue of girl-on-girl violence is currently missing in the CCCW research. The CCCW feels it is appropriate to include student input in its data for analysis.

In the second round of surveys, from Phase II (Middle Schools), an overwhelming majority of respondents reported having some case of girl-on-girl violence at their schools. Every high school and middle school that responded said that girl-on-girl violence could start the first year the girls arrive at the school. Out of all the elementary schools that responded, 45.5 percent said it started between the ages of nine and 10. However, a significant group of respondents (36.4 percent) said that it started as young as seven years of age. With schools

reporting such widespread girl-on-girl violence on their campuses at an incredibly young age, the significance of these surveys is profound.

Background

As statistics have increasingly indicated, bullying in school is becoming more common than ever. Most adults can remember the harsh words that were said, friends that abandoned them, or the physical wounds that were inflicted from a school yard bully. Many children go to school every day in fear of going to the bathroom, riding the bus or eating in the cafeteria because that is where the bully will strike. On top of this fear of the bully itself, most victims of bullying will try to hide the fact they are even being bullied out of further fear of being labeled a “tattletale.” Headlines over the past decade make clear that bullying, especially among girls, is a serious problem. Several times a year high profile stories about bullying leading to childhood suicide (coming to be known as “bullycideⁱ”) are released, indicating further, not only the frequency but also the virility of bullying today. A Department of Education statistic, again reinforcing the significance of bullying, states that one in four children experience some form of bullying in America every dayⁱⁱ. Many states have passed anti-bullying legislation in response to this recognized trend in behavior. This legislation, however, varies from state to state in its rigor and ability to tackle the complex issue of bullying.

Before attempting to address and suppress bullying, it is important to first have a clear understanding of what bullying is. While bullying occurs across all genders, this report is entitled “Girl-on-Girl Violence” and as is indicated, will focus solely on violence between female students in Contra Costa County Schools. The term violence, for the intent of this report, refers broadly to bullying as much beyond physical altercation between two girls. As such, a clear definition of bullying which accounts for the various kinds of interactions is still needed.

Psychologists, in an attempt to account for the various means of bullying, have defined it as any **negative actions carried out by physical contact, words, faces, gestures, rumors, and intentional exclusion from a larger group**ⁱⁱⁱ.

Additionally, each case of bullying must also meet three criteria: 1) it must cause intentional harm, 2) it must be carried out repeatedly, and 3) it must represent a relationship characterized by an imbalance of power^{iv}. Intentional harm can be carried out in several different ways. One organization that showcases these numerous forms intentional harm may take is **the Ophelia Project**^v, a nationwide group attempting to raise awareness of violence and aggression in schools. The Ophelia Project has also commissioned several studies on different forms of bullying and has come to conclusions on how best to combat it on a personal and school level. With so many prominent media stories about girl-on-girl bullying, however, some have argued a more effective way to combat the problem is on a statewide basis rather than one student at a time.

An example of this occurred with the **State of Massachusetts'** groundbreaking prosecution of nine high school students who caused one girl's suicide through bullying. Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old girl who had recently moved to America from Ireland, was the victim of this attack. While adjusting to a new school, Phoebe became the target of intense bullying, the specifics of which are still coming to light in the court. District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel charged nine of the antagonists with a variety of crimes that were later described as intense and endless bullying. "The investigation revealed relentless activities directed towards Phoebe to make it impossible for her to stay at school. The bullying for her was intolerable,^{vi}" said District Attorney Scheibel. The trial is still underway, and a jury has yet to convict anyone of a crime.

In addition to an unprecedented trial, the Phoebe Prince case led to some of the toughest anti-bullying legislation in the country. The Massachusetts State Legislature unanimously passed a piece of legislation outlawing bullying and cyber-bullying on school grounds^{vii}, and required school employees to report all instances of bullying to the principal. The new law defines bullying as **“the repeated use by a perpetrator of a written, verbal, or electronic expression, or physical act or gesture . . . directed at a victim that causes physical or emotional harm or damage to the victim’s property; places the victim in reasonable fear or harm to himself/herself or of damage to his/her property; [or] creates a hostile environment at school.”**^{viii} If the principal determines that any of the acts of bullying are criminal, they are required to report the case to the police.

What makes the Massachusetts law so much stronger than most other states’ anti-bullying laws is not the requirement to report bullying; it is the inclusiveness of the law. All students are protected under Massachusetts law, which is in stark contrast to many other states, including California, whose laws are strongest when protecting students from hate crime bullying and gang violence. Hate crime and gang violence laws do not cover common acts of bullying, because bullying is not specifically defined as illegal under California state law^{ix}. These anti-hate crime and anti-gang violence laws merely take what are already criminal acts, and create a method for different agencies to coordinate amongst themselves in order to prevent violence and crimes from happening on school property. In theory, a school bully could only be charged with physical assault or harassment because **there is nothing under current law which makes bullying a crime. Furthermore, the laws fail to educate school staff about bullying, and make no clear indication to the available course for legal action against bullies.** Also, unlike Massachusetts, California has no law that deals with cyber bullying^x.

Despite the failure of California law to fully address bullying and cyber-bullying, there are some laws currently in place attempting to protect students from bullying. **Bully Police USA**^{xi}, a nonprofit organization which operates a website focused on different state laws addressing bullying, evaluates the strength of each state's laws and grades them. Bully Police USA has given California a B grade since 2003. California's grade was increased from a D to a B due to the passage of Senate Bill 719, the "Bullying Prevention for School Safety and Crime Reduction Act of 2003," an anti bullying bill in California which addresses:

“facilitating interagency coordination and collaboration among school districts, county offices of education, youth serving agencies, allied agencies, community-based organizations, and law enforcement agencies to improve school attendance, encourage good citizenship, and to reduce school violence, school crime, including hate crimes, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, gang membership and gang violence, truancy rates, bullying, teen relationship violence, and discrimination and harassment, including, but not limited to, sexual harassment^{xii}.”

Bully Police USA, however, points out that the law lacks a definition for bullying, does not provide any protection against retaliation or false accusation, and does not protect school districts from law suits that could result due to compliance with the law^{xiii}. Instead, the bill focuses solely on school safety with regards to gang violence and crime on campuses. Perhaps of the greatest significance to California laws in reference to bullying, is the fact that bullying is not a crime in California and subsequently Senate Bill 719 does not do much to prevent it on a legal level.

Senate Bill 719 also does not deal with cyber-bullying. Cyber-bullying is a new phenomenon that schools around the country are just now beginning to deal with. The biggest question surrounding cyber-bullying and its prevention is whether or not schools are responsible for handling bullying issues that are happening off of school grounds^{xiv}. Cyber-bullying is defined as “**willful and repeated harm inflicted through phones and computers**^{xv}.” This can include sending mean or crude text messages, posting mean comments on social networking

websites such as Facebook or MySpace, or, as in some extreme cases, starting a school gossip blog. Interestingly, the Cyber-bullying Research Center found in a study that girls were more likely to experience cyber-bullying than boys^{xvi}. They found that the manifestations of cyber-bullying also differ by gender: girls were more likely to spread rumors through cyber-bullying and boys were more likely to post cruel pictures and videos^{xvii}.

A recent *New York Times* article addressed this new type of bullying, and suggested that schools today are having trouble grappling with it. The article clearly states “school district discipline codes say little about educators’ authority over student cell phones, home computers and off-campus speech. Reluctant to assert an authority they are not sure they have, educators can appear indifferent to parents... alarmed by recent adolescent suicides linked to bullying^{xviii}.” CCCW believes new rules need to be established to help make clear what is within a school’s authority to enable it to deal with cases of bullying and cyber-bullying. Though cyber-bullying may occur on a home computer, if schools were to take action to stop it, it is likely that a more friendly school environment would arise, which would be inherently a more comfortable environment in which to learn.

The problem of bullying has been around for a long time and is an ever evolving social problem. It may still happen on the playground but it can also happen on a home computer. These vicious and unrelenting personal attacks have many negative consequences for the victims. There have been far too many deaths in recent years due to “bullycide.” Many organizations have been working on creative solutions to combat bullying and provide relief to its victims. Some states are passing strong new anti-bullying legislation that hopefully will provide some relief to this issue.

Results and Findings

The surveys done by the CCCW (as detailed in the initial section of this report) were broken down by school level – elementary, middle, and high schools. The surveys for each subsequent school level contained slight differences in the language to ensure age-appropriate questions. For the purposes of showing the results they will be broken down by level, accordingly.

Elementary School Results

One hundred percent of elementary schools that responded said that there had been reports of girl-on-girl violence at their school. Of those, 80 percent said that girl-on-girl violence had happened more than once on their campus, though two of the schools failed to report the actual number of times girl-on-girl violence had occurred. However, of the schools that did report the number of occurrences, the lowest number was six and the highest was 25 times.

Elementary school administrators reported that girl-on-girl bullying begins between the ages of seven and eight. Administrators conclusively agreed that bullying occurs on the playground. However, 54.5 percent also reported the classroom as a place where bullying occurs, 18.2 percent said the cafeteria and 9.1 percent listed other and filled in “the restroom.” The two most common forms of bullying reported were emotional assault and verbal assault, both of which were reported by 81.9 percent of respondents. However, 45.5 percent also listed physical assault as a form of girl-on-girl violence experienced on their campus, including one school which listed sexual assault.

Seventy percent of schools replied that they believe girl-on-girl violence is not “that much” of a problem on their campus. Thirty percent said that it was a problem, while no schools said it was “very much” a problem. Fifty-four and a half percent said that they thought their

school had a low girl-on-girl violence problem and 45.5 percent said they thought the problem in the school was about average. Thirty six point four percent said that students were the first to report bullying instances when they occur. Twenty seven point three percent said it was the friend of the victimized student who would report it, and 18.2 percent said that it was parents. One school mentioned that the yard supervisors reported bullying first, and another said it was office staff. Not one elementary school respondent said it was a teacher who was the first to report a case of girl-on-girl violence.

In regards to dealing with a case of girl-on-girl violence once reported, the elementary schools offered varying responses. Many reported using a mixture of options that the survey suggested. Forty five and a half percent reported the case to a school counselor, 36.4 percent said that they referred the student to an anti-bullying program, 45.5 percent said they put the student on school probation, the same number said that they put the child into in-school suspension, 34.6 percent suspended or removed the child, the same number notified family members of the problem and 45.5 percent chose the “other” option on the survey. Those who chose the “other” option noted that they involved the principal in handling bullying problems or took the students’ lunch away. No school said they ever involved the police or juvenile hall and no school said they did nothing.

To combat bullying, 18.2 percent said they installed cameras in the school and 9.1 percent said they had a police officer stop by the school regularly. An overwhelming 90.9 percent said they used a mixture of anti-bullying tactics, from talking to the students about bullying in class to training the staff on how to handle bullies. That same 90.9 percent said they had a formal anti-bullying program in place on their campus.

Middle School Results

All but one middle school reported that there were reports of girl-on-girl violence on their campus. A majority of the schools (85.7 percent) said that it had happened more than once. Girl-on-girl violence tended to happen in classrooms and hallways (85.7 percent). Another frequent location where girl-on-girl violence was reported to occur was the playground (42.9 percent). A significant number of schools (35.7 percent) also said that bullying occurred online or at locations just outside of campus, like a park or a store.

The most common form of girl-on-girl violence reported was verbal assault (85.7 percent). An overwhelming 71.4 percent listed emotional assault and 42.9 percent listed physical assault as forms of girl-on-girl violence experienced on their campus. Most schools (60 percent) believed that they had an average amount of girl-on-girl violence on their campus.

The most typical response from middle schools, when asked how they dealt with these problems once diagnosed was to refer the students to a counselor (85.7 percent). Half of all respondents said that they assigned students to some sort of disciplinary program and another half said they used “in school suspension.” Some schools had gone as far as calling the police with cases of girl-on-girl violence (28.6 percent). A majority of middle schools (59.1 percent) said they had some sort of anti-bullying program. Two specific programs that were mentioned by respondents were the “Where Everyone Belongs” and “Safe School Ambassador” programs. Other schools noted that they have a police officer check in with the school (64.3 percent) and have installed cameras (35.7 percent) and half of respondents said they had parents and faculty patrolling the halls.

High School Results

Every high school reported that there were reports of girl-on-girl violence on their campus. All of them said it has been reported more than once; however, two schools failed to give exact numbers. The lowest number of reported cases was two and the highest was 15. It should be noted that the school that only had two cases of reported girl-on-girl violence was an extreme outlier in the study since it is a small continuation high school with only 20 students.

Most high schools (62.4 percent) reported bullying starting between the ages of 13 and 15. This age, coincidentally, is the youngest age girls can enter high school and thus the youngest age school administrators see these girls and their cases of bullying. Bullying was mostly reported in the hallway, classroom, and other places on campus (87.5 percent). Half of respondents listed other places bullying occurred, such as the gym or locker room, on the internet (cyber-bullying), or just off campus.

Every respondent said that girl-on-girl violence involved verbal assault. An overwhelming number (75 percent) said that it also involved physical assault and 50 percent said that it included emotional assault (i.e. exclusion). Especially troubling was that 12.5 percent of schools reported girl-on-girl violence which also involved sexual assault and harassment. However, 75 percent said they do not believe there is much of a bullying problem on their campus. One school said that they felt that there was not “much” of a bullying problem on their campus and one outlier said there was none. This is the before-mentioned outlier school that had no bullying problems that year.

Most often it was students who were reporting cases of girl-on-girl bullying (37 percent). However, several schools pointed out that it is often a mixture of people who report bullying including the student, teachers, school administrators or other witnesses. Every school said that

they were willing to suspend or remove a student caught being a bully. Most said that they would also refer the case to a counselor (75 percent) and/or place the student on suspension (62.5 percent).

Half of the high schools reported having some form of anti-bullying program and half said they did not. Seventy-five percent of schools said installing video cameras and having parents and staff patrol the schools were their most significant anti-bullying techniques. One quarter said they have a police officer permanently stationed on campus.

Recommendations and Advice

All of the CCCW research suggests that the most effective way to combat bullying is through **education--teaching students about the signs, effects and consequences of bullying.** This is one of the reasons the CCCW plans on conducting workshops throughout Contra Costa County about girl-on-girl violence. These workshops will present a safe environment for victims of bullying to talk about their experiences and seek counseling, and will enable the CCCW and the community at large, to understand the state of girl-on-girl violence in the County. The workshops will also target the bystander children who witness bullying happening around them but do not report it. The goal is to create a culture where students are encouraged to report bullying to a teacher, and where it is acceptable to stand up to a bully on behalf of another person. This solution is one that organizations like the Ophelia Project are using to effectively combat bullying. Bullies will stop once they realize that their behavior is unacceptable, and that there will be severe consequences for bullying. In order to create this environment, bullying must no longer be tolerated in schools, neighborhoods or the community.

The CCCW also recommends that the school districts of the County take a proactive stance in lobbying in Sacramento on behalf of students to demand stronger anti-bullying

legislation. A clear and encompassing definition for bullying is needed in California anti-bullying legislation. Once this is achieved, the state will then be able to create laws that can greater protect children.

Future Plans

Over the next year, the CCCW plans to continue its study of girl-on-girl violence with a specific focus on increasing the response rate to the survey. The CCCW plans on administering the survey to students in the County to gain knowledge of their firsthand experience with girl-on-girl violence. The CCCW would like to start setting up workshops throughout the County to educate parents, teachers and students about girl-on-girl violence and the ways in which it can be overcome. The workshops will feature professional speakers who can further shed light on the issue. The CCCW will also be seeking out several students and parents whose children have suffered through bullying to share their personal experiences with girl-on-girl violence. A psychologist will speak to why girl-on-girl violence occurs, its numerous effects and what can be done to end it. These workshops will also include a data collection component where the CCCW will be soliciting information about girl-on-girl violence from participants.

The CCCW hopes to get a diverse group of community members involved in these workshops. The CCCW will conduct outreach to parents, students, and school faculty groups to encourage them to attend. The CCCW would also like to see other leaders in the community attend these workshops. With as broad a coalition of educators, students, parents and community leaders as possible, the CCCW would like to educate the public about girl-on-girl violence and find ways to work together in the community to stop it.

In Conclusion

It is clear from this study that schools are seeing cases of girl-on-girl violence on their campuses. Girl-on-girl violence seems to be starting at a very young age, with 100 percent of elementary schools reporting cases of girl-on-girl violence. Many schools also report that they have no formal anti-bullying program in place on their campus. This signifies a clear need within Contra Costa County, and with the additionally alarming number of schools reporting problems with cyber-bullying, it is clear that action must be taken now. In 2011 the CCCW hopes to take steps in this direction by educating the public on what girl-on-girl violence is and finding ways to prevent it.

ⁱ "Bullycide" a new colloquial term used to describe the suicide of a young person to escape bullying.

ⁱⁱ "Mass. Governor Signs Landmark Anti-Bullying Law - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News*. Cbs News, 3 May 2010. Web. 10 July 2010. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/05/03/national/main6456989.shtml>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Olweus, D. (1997). Bully/victim problems in school: Facts and intervention. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 12, 495-510.

^{iv} "The Ophelia Project." *The Ophelia Project - Leading Resource On Relational Aggression*. Jan. 2006. Web. 10 July 2010. <http://www.opheliaproject.org/main/ra_glossary_bullying.htm>.

^v The Ophelia Project is a group that's mission is to serve youth and adults who are affected by relational and other non-physical forms of aggression by providing them with a unique combination of tools, strategies and solutions. They CCCW studies that look into the problem of bullying in our society, have a website and create workshops to teach people about what bullying is and how to stop it. http://www.opheliaproject.org/main/who_we_are.htm

^{vi} "9 Teens Charged for "Unrelenting" Bullying - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News*. Cbs News, 29 Mar. 2010. Web. 12 July 2010. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/03/29/national/main6343798.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>>.

^{vii} Ibid2

^{viii} "Bullying Bill OK'd in House, 148 to 0 - The Boston Globe." *Boston.com*. 3 May 2010. Web. 15 July 2010. <http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2010/03/19/bullying_bill_okd_in_house_148_to_0/>

^{ix} Bullying is mentioned in California anti-bullying laws but it is not defined. This means that someone can be charged with criminal actions that are defined by the law that are part of bullying, such as assault. But you can not be charged with bullying as a crime.

^x "Mass. - Senate Bill 261." *BullyPolice.org*. Web. 10 Sept. 2010. <http://www.bullypolice.org/ma_law.html>.

^{xi} Bully Police USA describes itself as a "watch-dog organization – Advocating for bullied children and reporting on state anti bullying laws. They rank each states anti bullying laws on a grading scale of A++ to F. They base their ranking on twelve points that will be listed in the "articles reference" part of the report.

^{xii} "CA - Various Statutes." *BullyPolice.org*. Web. 8 Sept. 2010. <http://www.bullypolice.org/ca_law.html>.

^{xiii} Hoffman, Jan. "Online Bullies Pull Schools into the Fray." *The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia*. The New York Times, 27 June 2010. Web. 13 July 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/style/28bully.html?_r=2&src=me&ref=general>

^{xiv} Ibid 13

^{xv} "Research Findings on Cyberbullying - Downloadable Charts, Statistics, Data, Studies." *Cyberbullying Research Center - Findings, Stories, Cases, Downloads, Fact Sheets, Tips and Strategies, News Headlines, a Blog, and Other Helpful Resources*. 2010. Web. 12 Sept. 2010. <<http://www.cyberbullying.us/research.php>>.

^{xvi} Ibid 14

^{xvii} Ibid 13

^{xviii} Ibid 13

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