



Prevalence Influence of School Bullying on Mental Health among Junior Secondary School Students in Port Harcourt Metropolis

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated prevalence influence of school bullying on mental health among students' in junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. A survey design was adopted for the study. The study made use of three specific objectives, three research questions and three hypotheses. Population of the study consisted of 42,670 students of public junior secondary school of J. S. S. 2 and 3 of 2023/2024 academic session in Port Harcourt metropolis (according to data from Rivers State Universal Basic Education Board, Port Harcourt). The sample size of 375 students was obtained using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. The sample size were collected from 19 public junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State using random sampling technique. Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire titled "Prevalence Influence of School Bullying on Students' Mental Health (PISBSMH) Questionnaire" from the respondents. Data gathered were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation to answer the three research questions posed while t-test statistics was used to test the three null hypotheses formulated at 0.05 level of significance level. The findings revealed that verbal bullying, physical bullying and social bullying influences mental health of students in Junior Secondary Schools. Therefore, it was recommended amongst others that School authority should provide training for staff on recognizing, addressing and reporting bullying. They should also provide access to mental health resources and counseling for students affected by bullying, promoting resilience and coping strategies.

Keyword: School Bullying, Mental Health, Students, Junior Secondary School

INTRODUCTION

In many countries across the globe, bullying victimization is a serious problem for students, parents, and government. Bullying is a form of social interaction in which a more dominant individual (the bully) exhibits aggressive behaviour intended to cause distress to the less dominant individual (the victim). According to Morena and Englander (2020), bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior by another person or group of persons that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or highly likely to be repeated. Allison et al. (2014) opined that bullying is the intentional use of force, threat, intimidation and aggressive behaviour against others to dominate and control them. Thus, bullying involves repeated hurtful actions between peers where an imbalance of power exists. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) stated that the imbalance of power often results from disparity in physical strength, social status, group size or a recognition of the victim's vulnerabilities. Thus, it is likely that, children who display aggressive characteristics usually exhibit at adult stage, deviant behaviours such as sexual harassment, date violence, wife battering, gang attacks, child abuse and elder abuse.

Bullying is a common anti-social behaviour which is being exhibited in schools and the dangers inherent in it can hinder the glorious educational goals of in-school adolescents. School bullying is a

situation in which a student is exposed, repeatedly or over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. These negative actions take place when an imbalance of power exists between the bully and the victim. Whereas a bully is an individual who always needs to feel powerful and in control, enjoys inflicting pain and injury on others, and claims to have been provoked, a victim is the individual who is the target of bullying, while a bully-victim is a bully who is also bullied. However, Fareo and Habila (2018) noted that bullying does not occur when there is conflict between people of equal or similar power. Thus, bullies in most cases are more powerful than their victims (Mosia, 2015). In essence, in school bullying a bully is the aggressive student who picks on another student with the intent to inflict harm.

Bullying can take many forms, some of which are more obvious than others. The common forms of bullying among school children include physical assaults, verbal attacks, social aggression, sexual bullying, prejudicial bullying as well as abuse via the internet (cyber bullying) or other emerging technologies (Gabriel-Job & Azubogu, 2022; Ekedama & Eboh, 2024). However, this study will focus on three distinctive forms of bullying, namely; verbal bullying, physical bullying and social bullying. Verbal bullying is any slanderous statement or accusation that causes the victim undue emotional distress. It involves insults, mocking, using derogatory terms, constant teasing, issuing verbal threats, name calling and even threats. Ekedama and Eboh (2024) stated that a bully can disguise verbal bullying as friendly banter between pals which may be challenging for the victim to establish. Therefore, this form of bullying can become a long-term source of stress and anxiety (Vinney, 2021). Physical bullying could be in the form of causing physical injuries, punching, shoving, slapping, attacking, fighting, and deabagging (Tambawal & Umar, 2017). Jamabo et al. (2023) noted that physical bullying behaviour can be exhibited by both boys and girls or men and women in the society. Social bullying also known as relational bullying is any form of bullying that causes damage to a victim's psychic and emotional well-being. Social bullying is viewed as harm that occurs through exploitation of connection among peers them trying to exclude the victim from his or her social connection (Mbah, 2020; Adediran & Ogunleye, 2023). According to Adewoye and Plessis (2021), social bullying includes spreading malicious rumors about people, harassment, provocation, making fun of someone, getting certain people to gang up on others. Agi (2017) stated that social vices have impacted negatively on secondary schools. The implication is that, bullying do occurs in school environment, as most adolescents spend a considerable amount of time at school.

Bullying at school could be physical or verbal or may come in the form of social manipulation or attack on property. Bullying at schools has become a global issue, and in some situations, the victims may suffer long-term repercussions. Vasanthakumani et al. (2022) observed that almost all public and private schools have some type of bullying. According to School-based Violence Report (SVR), developing countries experiences high rate of violence in both primary and secondary schools which affects both students and teachers regardless of age, gender and race (Okeke et al., 2024). In essence, bullying is a pervasive problem in schools that affects a lot of students. Students who are bullied avoid attending school and have higher absenteeism rates, dislike school, receive poor grades and low standardized test scores. Corroborating this assertion, Makafane (2019) argued that the existence of bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can create a negative impact for the general school climate and the right of students to learn in a safe environment. Accordingly, Fareo and Habila (2018) emphasized that bullying is one form of violence that has been threatening the life of students in school in Nigeria. Malik and Ahmed (2019) stressed that bullying has an adverse effect on children's mental and emotional health, quality of life and academic performance. In agreement, Adewoye and Plessis (2021) opined that school bullying is a widespread issue that affects school students in many parts of their lives psychologically; emotionally and educationally. Also, Adediran and Ogunleye (2023) averred that bullying among students not only decreases their academic performance but also causes physical injury and mental health problems. This indicates that, bullying at school can have numerous effects on student's mental health.

Mental health problems were operationalized as difficulty in concentrating, sleep disorders, headache, stomach pain, feeling tense, sad and/or dizzy. According to Odufin and Igabari (2023)

mental health refers to a person's total well-being, which includes psychological, social and emotional well-being. Furthermore, they opined that teenagers with significant health issues, particularly those who have experience emotional abuse in the past are more likely to struggle academically and even drop out school. Relatedly, bullying is shown to increase the risk of poor mental health and may partly explain these detrimental changes. In agreement with this view, Le et al. (2019) reported an inverse relationship between bullying and mental health among 11–16-year-olds in Vietnam. They also found that poor mental health can make some children and adolescents more vulnerable to bullying at school. Also, Bayer et al. (2018) examined links between bullying at school and mental health among 8–9-year-old children in Australia and it was shown that bullying have detrimental effects that persist into late adolescence and contribute independently to mental health problems. Similarly, a review of the mental health consequences of bullying for children and adolescents revealed that bullying is associated with severe symptoms of mental health problems (Arseneault et al., 2017 in Källmén & Hallgren, 2021).

In Nigeria, Alagbu et al. (2013) cited in Alex-Hart et al. (2014) found a high prevalence rate of bullying in six secondary schools in Anambra and Enugu States in Southeast Nigeria. Agi (2017) attested that school bullying and other defiant behaviours are not helping government's efforts at arresting the seeming falling standard of education in post primary. However, there seems to be variations in the prevalence of bullying among boys and girls. Fareo and Habila (2018) discovered that boys appeared to be more involved in bullying than girls across all bully status groups. Thus, bullying is pervasive and terribly harmful for bullies, victims, and the school communities. Bullying makes schools to be unsafe places for schools' students and it contributes in the belief that some schools are become not safe anymore. Consequently, Tambawal and Umar (2017) postulated that it is difficult to discover a secondary school today where bullying does not exist. This implies that bullying is rampant in secondary school and could has a lot of effects on the students. Even being a bystander to bullying may have a negative impact on a person's health. Thus, it becomes expedient to have an insight on prevalence influence of school bullying on mental health among students.

Statement of the Problem

Bullying as a maladaptive behaviour, is encountered regularly by children and adolescents in schools worldwide. It is a complex social problem that can have severe negative consequences for both bullies and victims especially as bullying has the potential to cause either physical or psychological harm to the victim. Students affected by bullying will be at higher risk of developing depression, anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, suicidal tendencies, low self-esteem, poor social adjustment which may likely effect their academic performance and mental health as compared to others. Also, others in the school environment, such as teachers and bystanders, could be impacted with feelings of fear, apprehension and stress. This problem is a major concern to government, parent, teaching profession as well as the entire society. Thus, school officials, teachers, parents and students have exerted great efforts to addressing bullying, particularly in the school environment.

Despite the great effort to make schools pleasant, friendly and safer place devoid of bullying for learning, Fareo and Habila (2018) observed that a reduction of bullying is not always evident, as threats of attack in schools often leading to breakdown of rules and orders are often the case in many Nigerian schools. This indicate that, if bullying at school is not timely and properly addressed, bullies could resort to mental health problems and criminal vices. However, its prevalence effect in public junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis is not yet known. Thus, this study intend to empirically determine the prevalence influence of school bullying on mental health in junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Objective of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the prevalence influence of school bullying on mental health among students in junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. Specifically, the study intend to:

1. Determine the influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. Ascertain the influence of physical bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.
3. Find out the influence of social bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. To what extent does verbal bullying influence mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?
2. To what extent does physical bullying influence mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?
3. To what extent does social bullying influence mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of physical bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.
3. There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of social bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Descriptive research design aims to systematically obtain information to describe a phenomenon, situation or population (Benibo, 2023). Thus, the design enabled the researcher to collect data using questionnaire and describe the views of the respondents. Population of the study consisted of 42,670 students of public junior secondary school of J. S. S. 2 and 3 of 2023/2024 academic session in Port Harcourt metropolis (according to data from Rivers State Universal Basic Education Board, Port Harcourt). The sample size of 375 students was obtained using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. The sample size were collected from 19 public junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis, Rivers State using random sampling technique. A self-structured instrument titled "Prevalence Influence of School Bullying on Students' Mental Health (PISBSMH) questionnaire was used to collected data from respondents. The instrument is in two parts to elicit information for the study, whereas Part One of the questionnaires sought for demographic information from the respondents, Part Two answer research questions which contains items on verbal bullying, physical bullying and social bullying. The instrument structured on a 4-point rating scale of Very High Extent (4 points), High Extent (3 points), Moderate High (2 points) and Low Extent (1 point) was validated by two Guidance and Counselling experts and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation. To ascertain the reliability of the instruments, fifteen copies of the instrument were distributed to J. S. S. 2 and 3 students of Community Secondary Schools (UBE), Bille, Degema LGA, Rivers State, which are not part of the sample for the study. The reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach Alpha reliability test, and it yielded a coefficient of 0.83 indicating the instrument was reliable. A total of 380 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents with the help of three assistants, and 375 copies were successfully retrieved. Mean

and standard deviation were used to analyze the data obtained; a mean score of 2.50 stood as the benchmark for acceptance, while t-test was used to analyze the hypotheses using SPSS IBM version 23. The decision rule was to reject the null hypothesis if the f-calculated value was greater than the f-critical value otherwise accept.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: To what extent does verbal bullying influence mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Table 1: Mean response on the influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis

S/N	Item	Male Students (N=195)			Female Students (N=180)		
		Mean	SD	HE	Mean	SD	HE
1.	Being intimidated by other students make me withdraw from social activities in school.	2.64	0.92	HE	3.19	0.85	HE
2.	Name-calling or using derogatory names make student feel low self-esteem.	3.02	0.68	HE	3.08	0.70	HE
3.	Taunting in school cause student depression.	2.61	0.89	HE	2.52	0.95	HE
4.	Spreading rumour about a student lead to feelings of betrayal, contributing to mental distress.	2.85	0.99	HE	2.92	1.00	HE
5.	Threatening language cause student post-traumatic stress disorder.	2.65	0.92	HE	2.56	0.95	HE
Grand Mean		2.75	0.88	HE	2.85	0.89	HE

Source: Field survey, 2024

Data presented in Table 1 shows the mean of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis. According to the table, being intimidated by other students made male students withdraw from social activities in school at mean rate of 2.64, while female students mean is 3.19. Name-calling or using derogatory names made male student feel low self-esteem at mean rate of 3.02, while female students mean is 3.08, Taunting in school causes male student depression at mean of 2.61, while female student mean was 2.52, Spreading rumour about male student lead to feelings of betrayal at mean of 2.85, while female student mean was 2.92, Threatening language cause male student post-traumatic stress disorder at mean of 2.65, while female student mean was 2.56. The grand means of 2.75 for male students, while female students was 2.85 which is above the bench mark means of 2.50. This implies that verbal bullying influences mental health of student to a high extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent does physical bullying influences mental health of junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Table 2: Mean response on the extent physical bullying influences mental health of junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis

S/N	Item	Male Students (N=195)			Female Students (N=180)		
		Mean	SD	HE	Mean	SD	HE
6.	Hitting cause me both short-term injuries and long-term psychological trauma.	2.64	0.92	HE	2.79	0.89	HE

7.	Physical intimidation cause me suicidal thoughts.	2.77	0.80	HE	2.37	1.02	LE
8.	Invading my personal space make me feels discomfort in social situations.	2.61	0.89	HE	2.77	0.93	HE
9.	Damaging my personal items create feelings of insecurity exacerbating mental health issues.	2.36	1.08	LE	2.80	0.95	HE
10.	Pushing in school often cause me anxiety disorders.	2.67	0.99	HE	2.42	0.99	LE
Grand Mean		2.61	0.93	HE	2.63	0.95	HE

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 2 highlights the mean of physical bullying on mental health of students covered by the study. According to the data gather in Table, hitting caused male students both short-term injuries and long-term psychological trauma at mean of 2.64, while female student mean indicates 2.79. Physical intimidation caused male students to have suicidal thoughts at mean of 2.77, while female students mean was 2.37. Invading personal space made male students felt discomfort in social situations at mean of 2.61, while female students mean was 2.77. Damaging personal items create feelings of insecurity exacerbating mental health issues among male students at mean of 2.36, female students mean indicate 2.80 and Pushing in school often cause male students anxiety disorders at mean of 2.67, while female students mean was 2.42. The grand means of 2.61 for male students and 2.63 for female students is higher than the bench mark means of 2.50. This confirmed that the respondents hold strong opinion that school bullying in junior secondary school have high influence on mental health among them.

Research Question 3: To what extent does social bullying influences mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis?

Table 3: Mean response on the extent social bullying influences mental health of junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis

S/N	Item	Male Students (N=195)			Female Students (N=180)		
		Mean	SD		Mean	SD	
11.	Public shaming in school make me feel low self-esteem.	3.12	0.65	HE	3.37	1.04	HE
12.	Inciting other students against me cause post-traumatic stress disorder to me.	3.14	0.61	HE	3.21	1.11	HE
13.	Exclusion from school groups fosters feelings of rejection.	3.12	0.63	HE	3.12	1.19	HE
14.	Gossiping me in school make me feels betrayed.	3.12	0.63	HE	3.03	1.20	HE
15.	Labeling in school leads to mental health issues like depression.	3.11	0.65	HE	3.23	1.06	HE
Grand Mean		3.12	0.63	HE	3.19	1.12	HE

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

Table 3 reveals the mean of social bullying on mental health of students covered by the study. According to the data gather in Table 3, public shaming in school make male students feels low self-esteem at mean of 3.12, while female students was 3.37. Inciting other students against male students causes post-traumatic stress disorder to them at mean of 3.14, female students mean was 3.21. Exclusion from school groups fosters feelings of rejection among male students at mean of .3.12, while

female students was 3.12. Gossiping male students in school make them feels betrayed at mean of 3.12, while female students mean was 3.03. Labeling in school causes depression to male students with mean of 3.11, while female students mean was 3.23. The grand means of 3.12 and 3.19 for male and female students respectively is higher than the bench mark means of 2.50. This indicate that the respondents hold strong opinion that social bullying influences mental health of student to high extent.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 4: t-test analysis on prevalence influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	X	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male Students	195	2.75	.88	373	1.09	1.96	Accept
Female Students	180	2.85	.89				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4 showed that t-calculated value of 1.09 was less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance, hence the null hypothesis was accepted. Therefore, there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female students on influence of verbal bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of physical bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 5: t-test analysis on prevalence influence of physical bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	X	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male Students	195	2.61	.93	373	0.205	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	180	2.63	.95				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 5 showed that t-calculated value of 0.205 was less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance, hence the null hypothesis was accepted. This shows that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female students on influence of physical bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant difference in the mean response of male and female students on influence of social bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Table 6: t-test analysis on prevalence influence of social bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Variable	N	X	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Male Students	195	3.12	.63	373	0.74	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	180	3.19	1.12				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 6 showed that t-calculated value of 0.74 was less than t-critical value of 1.96 at 0.05 level of significance, hence the null hypothesis was accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female students on influence of social bullying on mental health among junior secondary school students in Port Harcourt metropolis.

Discussion of Findings

The finding revealed that there was significant influence of verbal bullying on mental health of students in junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis. This finding indicated that naming calling, gossiping are traits of verbal bullying can affect students' mental health. This study is in agreement with the study of Man et al. (2022) which affirmed that verbal bullying had the highest prevalence and the most significant negative effect on adolescent mental health. The finding also showed a significant influence of physical bullying on mental health of students. This finding means that physical bullying may likely affect mental health of students. This finding underscores that kicking, pushing, hitting, slapping which are traits of physical bullying can affect students' mental health. This finding agrees with the work of AlBuhairan et al. (2016) who posited that bullying and physical violence are serious and major public health issues that have a negative impact, are negatively associated with adolescents' well-being, and require special attention at the family, school, and community level. Again, Maunder et al. (2010) in their study found that physical bullying was the most harmful to students which likely agrees to this study.

Furthermore, the finding revealed that there was a significant influence of social bullying on mental health of students. This finding indicated that purposeful exclusion of classmates and rumor spreading which are traits of social bullying can affect students' mental health. This study harmonizes with the study of Chen et al. (2012) who found that social bullying such as rumor spreading and cyberbullying were more harmful than physical and verbal bullying. Consistent with prior studies, social bullying was the second most significantly associated with mental health for both students and teacher bullying (Najam & Kashif, 2018). Thus, social support can help minimize the negative mental health repercussions of bullying victimization (Ho et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the prevalence of school bullying being a global problem involving a high proportion of students worldwide, significantly influence mental health of students in public junior secondary schools in Port Harcourt metropolis to high extent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. School authority should provide training for staff on recognizing, addressing and reporting bullying and also, provide access to mental health resources and counseling for students affected by bullying, promoting resilience and coping strategies.
2. Parents should maintain open lines of communication with children about their school experiences, emphasizing the importance of discussing bullying.
3. Government should implement national awareness campaigns to educate students, parents and teachers about the effects of bullying and the importance of mental health.

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