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Understanding the Roles of Law Enforcement Officers in Community-Wide Bullying Prevention Efforts

What is known about bullying and how it relates to law enforcement officers?

Bullying affects a large number of students and may have a serious impact on those who are involved. In 2011, 28% of students aged 12-18 were bullied at school and 9% were cyberbullied anywhere (Robers, Kemp, Truman, & Snyder, 2013). Although traditionally, bullying has not been seen or treated as a criminal act, it has long been a concern of many in the law enforcement community and some bullying behaviors may be illegal. For example, acts of bullying may involve criminal acts, such as assault and battery, robbery, extortion, or threatening others.

Some children who bully are at risk for engaging in other illegal, antisocial, or worrisome behavior that may come to the attention of those in the law enforcement community. Children and youth who bully others are more likely than those who don't bully to get into fights, vandalize property, steal, and carry weapons; drop out of school; use alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana (Byrne, 1994; Haynie, Nansel, Eitel, Crump, Saylor, Yu, & Simons-Morton, 2001; Radliff, Wheaton, Robinson, & Morris, 2012). Those who bully others are also at higher risk of becoming involved in antisocial and criminal behavior later in their lives (Lösel & Bender, 2011; Olweus, 1993; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011), including dating and intimate partner violence (Falb, McCauley, Decker, Gupta, Raj, & Silverman, 2011).

Being exposed as children to illegal activity, such as parents' use of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence, and child maltreatment, also increases the likelihood that children will be involved in bullying — either as a victim of bullying, as one who bullies others, or both (Baldry, 2003; Bowes, Arseneault, Maughan, Taylor, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2009; Holt, Kaufman Kantor, & Finkelhor, 2009; Shields & Cicchetti, 2001).

Law Enforcement Officers' Unique Role in Addressing Bullying

How can the law enforcement community help to prevent bullying?

The school resource officer and other law enforcement personnel who are interested in bullying prevention have many critical roles. Not only must they carry out their sworn duty to enforce the law, they also must go beyond this traditional role to educate, prevent and solve problems, and provide resources (Rosiak, 2009). Effective prevention and response to bullying requires that law enforcement personnel:

- **Build positive relationships with students, teachers, parents, and others to help create a culture of tolerance and respect.** Relationships are essential in a community-based policing approach. By getting to know students by name and working to build trusting relationships with them, law enforcement officers may help prevent bullying from happening in the first place. Having a trusting relationship with a law enforcement officer may increase the likelihood that children and youth will report bullying that they have experienced, witnessed, or suspected, or prevent it from taking place at all (Garrett, 2010).

- **Engage in proactive activities to prevent bullying.** By familiarizing themselves with best practices and common misdirections in bullying prevention and response, law enforcement personnel can actively take part in school and community initiatives designed to reduce bullying and improve peer relations. Among the misdirections to avoid are harsh, inflexible discipline strategies, such as zero tolerance policies. Such policies have been found to harm student-adult relationships, dampen school climate, and contribute to poor student achievement (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Instead, graduated sanctions should be used for rule violations, which are appropriate for the developmental level of the child and the nature and severity of the bullying.

- **Become experts on the state's bullying law(s).** Most states currently have a law addressing bullying at school, and many of them address bullying online. Be familiar with your state law(s), the differences between bullying, harassment and discrimination, and share this knowledge with others.

- **Provide supervision, and be present and vigilant for warning signs.** The mere presence of an adult is often enough to deter bullying, and it is important to be seen as a safe adult who can be relied on to stop bullying. Law enforcement personnel have skills in monitoring the behavior of large groups of individuals and being vigilant to signs of trouble. Know what locations in the school or community are particular "hot spots" for bullying. Increase supervision in these places but be aware that bullying can often migrate to new locations where adults are not present.

- **Take part in efforts to investigate bullying and related behaviors.** When bullying or other problematic behaviors are reported or suspected within a school, community, or online setting, law enforcement personnel can work effectively with others to efficiently and thoroughly investigate the incident(s).

- **Take part in meetings with involved students and parents, where appropriate.** Depending on the situation, it may be helpful for law enforcement personnel to participate in meetings with youth who are involved with bullying, as well as with their parents.

- **Take appropriate action if a crime is involved.** If bullying behavior constitutes a crime, follow local laws and procedures to ensure public safety. Consider meeting with your prosecuting attorney to explore the possibility of instituting a behavior intervention plan instead of filing formal charges against youth. Removal from the school setting should be an option of last resort.

Challenges & Opportunities for the Law Enforcement Community

Law enforcement officers and school personnel may face the following challenges in addressing bullying and other issues of school safety:

- **Job responsibilities and expectations.** Law enforcement officers may have varying job responsibilities, missions, and professional cultures with different expectations regarding how bullying is defined, how it should be prevented, or what constitutes appropriate responses to bullying. School personnel and law enforcement officers often operate according to different rules. For example, law enforcement officers must uphold the law, and school officials have a school code of rules to enforce (Rosiak, 2009). Agreements between local law-enforcement agencies and school districts can effectively define the role a school resource officer will play in assisting school personnel with discipline issues that do not involve violations of law or threaten security (National Association of School Resource Officers, 2012).

- **Negative perceptions.** Sometimes, there are negative community perceptions about law enforcement personnel (Terrill & Reisig, 2003) and their roles in schools and/or in working to address specific issues such as bullying (Rosiak, 2009).

Despite these challenges, there is wide agreement among educators, law enforcement personnel, and community members that students, families, and communities benefit from schools that are safe and that have positive climates for learning (Rosiak, 2009). Law enforcement officers are key players in efforts within schools and in the broader community to prevent and address bullying.

How the Law Enforcement Community Can Engage and Include Others in Community Bullying Prevention Strategies

Planning community prevention strategies to address bullying requires engaging a host of stakeholders and developing partnerships with parents, youth, community leaders, and professionals across all disciplines. Professionals in the law enforcement community bring a unique perspective and expertise to the issue of bullying. To engage others in community building prevention and response strategies:

- Reach out to school personnel, leaders of community groups, parents, and youth to offer your assistance in helping to develop or carry out school- and community-based prevention efforts designed to address bullying and improve school climate and community safety.

- Serve as resources in development of procedures for investigation of bullying incidents that occur on and off of school grounds and/or assist school personnel in carrying out such investigations, as appropriate. As school personnel may be particularly challenged to investigate instances of cyberbullying, law enforcement assistance may be particularly useful.

- Educate adult and youth members of the community about local and state laws related to bullying and cyberbullying.

- In cases where an alternative intervention may be appropriate, encourage an approach that minimizes the chance of youth facing criminal consequences for bullying behavior.

Ideas for Next Steps

- Learn more about bullying prevention through StopBullying.gov and the resources listed below. Review the research presented in the training modules and how it is best communicated to your peers and among motivated audiences.

- Review any existing data within your school or community regarding bullying. Consult the Community Action Toolkit and perform a landscape assessment that will help you identify relevant data, as well as the broader needs and opportunities within the community.

- Plan a bullying prevention event that will inform and train a broader network of officers, staff, parents, youth, or other members of the community to help dispel common myths and misdirections. This will also shed light on the importance of a holistic, community-based effort.

Resources and References

Sample of Resources Available

Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) – DARE provides officer training that supports the development and evaluation of their curriculum by providing educational and strategic planning materials. For more information, visit www.dare.org.

National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) – NASRO is a leader in school-based policing, this nonprofit is dedicated to providing the highest quality of training to school based law enforcement officers in order to promote safer schools and safer kids. For more information, visit www.nasro.org.

U.S. Department of Justice – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) – OJJDP supports states and communities in their efforts to develop and implement effective and coordinated prevention and intervention programs and to improve the juvenile justice system so that it protects public safety, holds offenders accountable, and provides treatment and rehabilitative services tailored to the needs of juveniles and their families. For more information, visit www.justice.gov.

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