Prevalence of Bullying among Primary School Pupils in Al-Najaf City, Iraq

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bullying is a harmful behavior that involves repeated aggressive actions intended to cause harm or distress to an individual. It is a major public health concern affecting children and adolescents. There is no local relevant study regarding this issue.
Objectives: To determine the prevalence of bullying in primary schools.
Materials and methods: A cross-sectional study was carried out from 1st September 2023 to the 10th of April 2024 for a sample consisting of 1216 pupils. The sample of the present study was a group of pupils in fifth and sixth primary school classes for both sexes; those were found in the selected schools out of 201 schools currently found at Al-Najaf city, Iraq. The data collecting tools were direct interviews with the participants and a questionnaire composed of two parts, the first consisting of the demographic characteristics data and the second being the bullying items among primary school pupils.
Results: The prevalence of bullying was 81.7%. The study shows 3.5% bullyer, 37.3% bullied, 41% bullyer/victim, and 18.3% were non-victims non bullyer. With the exception of the number of close friends in class, all other items were related to (P-value < 0.05) the prevalence of bullying roles (bullyer, bullied, and bullyer/victim).
Conclusion: The study found a high prevalence of bullying among primary school students in Najaf City, which is concerning. An inverse relationship between protective factors and the prevalence of bullying has been identified. To address this, teachers should dedicate class time to discussing the harms of bullying and promote tolerance, while also supporting strategies to reduce school violence.
Keywords: Prevalence; Bullying Roles; Pupils; Primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a harmful behavior that involves repeated aggressive actions intended to cause harm or distress to an individual. It can take many forms, including physical (like hitting or pushing), verbal (such as name-calling or teasing), social (exclusion or spreading rumors) [1]. After home, schools are part of a microsystem that is essential to a child's social and emotional growth [2].

The victims of bullying are unable to defend themselves for a variety of reasons, including having less physical strength and psychological fortitude than the bully [2]. Bullying in schools has grown to be a common issue that can have detrimental long-term effects on both the bully and the victim [3]. Victimization and bullying can have long-lasting consequences on kids and teenagers that last into adulthood, such as dropping out of school, suffering physical harm, social and psychological disorders including low self-esteem, sadness, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and actions, grief and sorrow, humiliation, and a lower self-rated state of health [4].

Interventions against bullying in schools that involve parents, teachers, and students in a whole-school setting are currently imperative. There are numerous practical ways to stop bullying that parents and teachers can use [5]. Bullying occurs in four scenarios, the first one is the 'bully' who terrifies

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or victimizes another person, the second is the 'bullied' or victim who faced the negative behavior, the third is the 'bully-victim' which comprises a small sub-group of victims, they bully others, weaker than them because they were bullied or maltreated [6].

Bully-victims are at greater risk of developing mental disorders and violent behavior than those who are engaged in bullying only or are bullied only [7], the last group comprises of 'bystanders' and 'upstanders'. Bystanders are those who just watch, they witness but do not respond, whereas an upstander is the one who watches, judges, and is involved in mitigating the negative situation [8]. Bullying among children and teenagers can take place anywhere, such as at home, school, and at social gatherings or public places [9]. Hitting, shoving, spitting on, kicking, calling names or labeling, pointing out disabilities, and body shaming are some very common forms of direct bullying faced by teenage students at school [10]. Physical aggression, stealing possessions, and threatening are more commonly seen in boys [11]. Whereas, girls often face sexual comments and expressions from their peers and are more prone to relational or indirect victimization, such as scandalizing, slandering, and leaving out which comes under the domain of social bullying [12]. In Iraq, bullying among school-aged children occurs more frequently as a mixed type, approximately equally in both genders, older students were more frequently the victims, with prevalence rates ranging from 33.8% to 77.7% across different studies for various Iraqi cities, including Baghdad, Erbil, and Karbala, consistently showing high rates of bullying victimization [3, 13–15]. Because there is no relevant local study in our city, we conducted this study to determine the prevalence of bullying in primary schools in Al-Najaf city, Iraq.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Study Design and Setting

An analytical cross-sectional study was conducted from September 1, 2023, to April 10, 2024, in Najaf City, Iraq. A total of 1216 pupils were randomly selected from 20 primary schools (10 for males and 10 for females) out of the 201 schools in the city. The study focused on students in the fifth and sixth grades from both sexes. The selection process involved two stages: First, schools were selected through simple random sampling, with separate processes for male and female schools. In the second stage, pupils were chosen using simple random sampling from the lists of the two primary educational grades (5th and 6th) for both sexes.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using a pre-validated, questionnaire-based survey, with direct interviews conducted with each participant, achieving a response rate of 97.6%. The researchers developed the questionnaire, pre-tested it on 50 students, and updated it based on a literature review to ensure its reliability. After expert review, the final questionnaire included two domains: Demographic characteristics and 15 questions covering three types of bullying (physical bullying, verbal bullying, and social bullying). The researcher conducted interviews with the selected pupils. The exclusion criteria included pupils who were initially part of the study but were excluded due to factors such as illness, unwillingness to participate, or incomplete questionnaires.

Sample size calculation

It was calculated by using the below equation which was used in medical studies [16]. After adjusting for the non-response of 10%, 346 were considered the sample size, and 1216 were included in the data analysis for increasing the validity of the present study.

$$n = \frac{Z^2 P(1-P)}{d^2}$$

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the Al- Najaf Education Directorate (3/37/3222 on 24/10/2023). Informed consents have been obtained from guardians of students who have agreed to participate.

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed by IBM SPSS-29 (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences, version 29, Chicago, IL, USA). Data were presented in frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The significance was tested using the Pearson Chi-square test (χ^2-test) and statistical significance was considered whenever the P-value was < 0.05.

RESULTS

Out of 1216 participants, there was 51.5% in the fifth class. Regarding the age groups, the highest percentage (42.1%) was in 10-11 years for both sexes. There were 52.1% females. From all study samples, 72% had no history of year's failure. Meanwhile, the highest percent (27.6%) had three brothers and sisters. Finally, 46.5% was the middle sequence in the family (Table 1).

A high prevalence (81.7%) of bullying was detected among the study sample (Figure 1).

The largest group (41%) consists of individuals who have both bullied others and been bullied themselves (bully/victim). While the lowest percentage of participants (4%) identified themselves solely as bullies (Figure 2).

The most common form of bullying was discovering that a classmate had told a lie about them, reported by 45.6% of students. However, 32.5% of students reported that being called by a name bothers them (Figure 3).

The highest percent (20.4%), he/she harassed one of the students in school. While the lowest percent (5.2%) were in took money or things that belonged to one of the pupils without his/her knowledge (Figure 4).

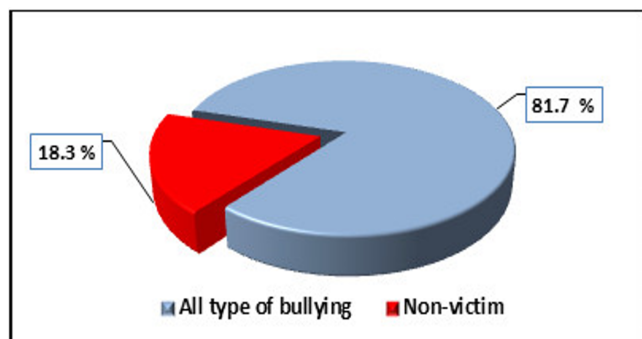Table 2 Shows significant statistical differences (P-value < 0.05) with all items except the number of close friends in class (P-value > 0.05) regarding the bullying roles.

DISCUSSION

The bullying problem is a complex issue with various causes and effects. Probably, that could be due to the bully pupil being a victim of bullying and trying to take revenge, or may be to relieve the pressure placed on him by family, peers, or school, so he engages in bullying against other pupils. Globally, bullying remains a significant issue in primary schools, and its prevalence varies across studies, ranging from 7.1% in Tajikistan to over 60% in Lithuania [17]. In England, 24% of pupils are victimized weekly, compared to 8% in Germany [18]. Similarly, 11.3% in Finland to 49.8% in Ireland, with a 19% rate reported in the United States [19]. In Iraq, studies
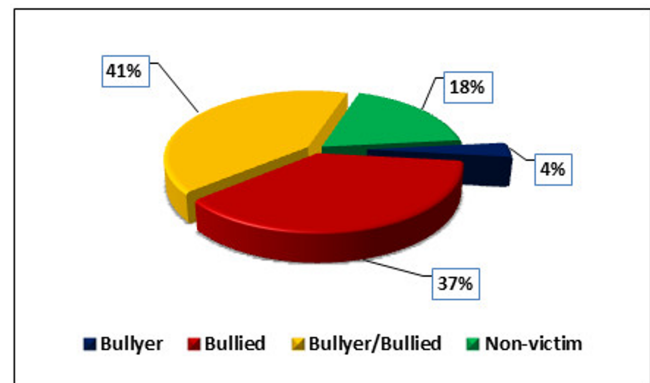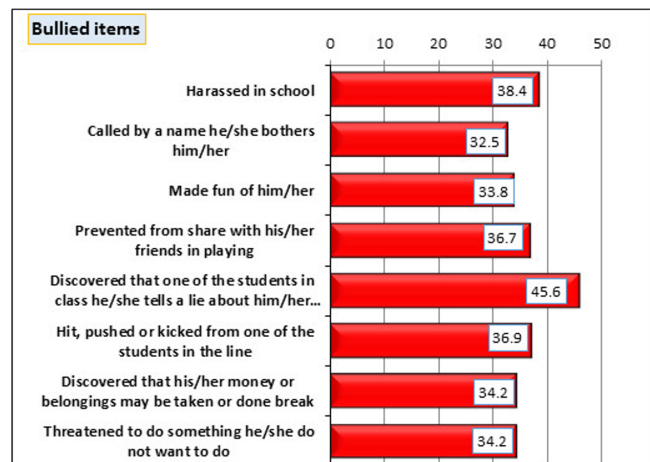
Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the 1216 pupils.

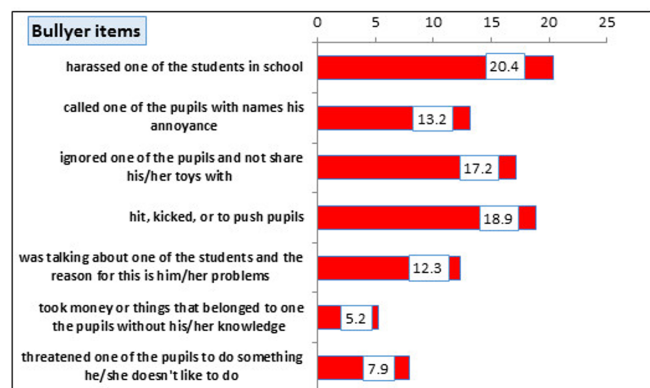| Demographic Characteristics	Number	Percent
Class		
Fifth	626	51.5
Sixth	590	48.5
Age (years)		
10–11	512	42.1
12	435	35.8
13	269	22.1
Sex		
Boy	583	47.9
Girl	633	52.1
Number of years of failure		
None	875	72
One year	245	20.1
> 1 year	96	7.9
Number of brothers and sisters		
None	80	6.6
1	82	6.7
2	246	20.2
3	336	27.6
4	221	18.2
5	115	9.5
6	64	5.3
7	41	3.4
≥ 8	31	2.5
Sequence in the family		
Only child in the family	80	6.6
Bigger	273	22.5
Middle	566	46.5
Little	297	24.4

Figure 1. Prevalence of bullying in the studied sample (1216).

Figure 2. The roles of bullying (in the past month).

Figure 3. Distribution of bullied items.*

* Mean ± SD = 36.53 ± 4.15

Figure 4. Distribution of bullyer items.*

* Mean ± SD = 13.58 ± 5.66

report varying prevalence rates across different cities, ranging from 33.8% to 60.6% [3, 13, 15]. The current study found an exceptionally high bullying prevalence rate of 81.7%, significantly higher than reported rates in other countries and various cities in Iraq. Various factors, including cultural differences among different nations, the country's security condition, the educational level of families, socioeconomic status, and the age of enrolled pupils in the study, may contribute to the variation in prevalence among various studies.

Consequently, the current study shows a mean ± SD of 36.53 ± 4.15 for the overall assessment of bullying items. Re-

search indicates that bullying often stems from power imbalances, with stronger students targeting weaker or disadvantaged peers [20]. Factors such as physical differences, economic conditions, and feelings of inferiority can contribute to victimization. Bullying can manifest as physical, verbal,

Table 2. Relationship between bullying items with the prevalence of bullying roles.

Bullying items	Bullyer		Bullied		Bullyer/ Bullied		Non-victim		P-value
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
He/she loves school									
Too much	33	3.3	375	37.7	382	38.4	206	20.7	
Somewhat	4	2.9	48	35.3	72	52.9	12	8.8	0.001
Never	5	6	30	35.7	44	52.4	5	6	
Number of close friends in class									
None	6	4.6	53	40.5	59	45	13	9.9	
< 5	12	3.3	131	36.2	160	44.2	59	16.3	0.064
> 5	24	3.3	269	37.2	279	38.6	151	20.9	
Pupils who harass him/her									
Same class	34	4.3	277	35.1	300	38	178	22.6	
Same class from a different division	2	1.2	59	36.2	92	56.4	10	6.1	0.001
The top class	4	2.1	86	45.7	77	41	21	11.2	
The low class	2	2.6	31	40.8	29	38.2	14	18.4	
The number of pupils who usually annoy him/her									
One	23	3.8	241	39.8	231	38.2	110	18.2	
2–3	18	4	162	36.1	161	35.9	108	24.1	0.001
> 3	1	6	50	30.9	106	65.4	5	3.1	
The place where been harassed in the:									
Class	15	3.1	193	40.3	199	41.5	72	15	
School-yard	20	4.2	162	34.2	163	34.4	129	27.2	0.001
School-hallways	3	2.2	61	45.5	59	44.0	11	8.2	
Way to school	4	3.1	37	28.7	77	59.7	11	8.5	
He/she tell anyone about these harassments exposed									
Never	27	4.6	236	40.3	213	36.4	109	18.6	
Teacher	2	1	67	33.3	97	48.3	35	17.4	0.003
Family	5	2.1	83	34.2	99	40.7	56	23	
Friends	8	4.3	67	35.8	89	47.6	23	12.3	
Teachers banned this harassment between pupils									
Never	28	4.2	255	37.9	253	37.6	137	20.4	
Once	4	1.8	71	31.6	123	54.7	27	12	0.001
Many times	3	2.5	51	43.2	55	46.6	9	7.6	
Always	7	3.5	76	38	67	33.5	50	25	
Pupils banned this harassment between pupils									
Never	23	3.7	246	39.2	220	35	139	22.1	
Once	5	1.9	89	33.6	148	55.8	23	8.7	0.001
Many times	6	3.8	58	36.7	67	42.4	27	17.1	
Always	8	4.8	60	36.4	63	38.2	34	20.6	
He/she raised a family member to contact the school to prevent harassment									
Never	31	4.9	228	35.8	210	33	168	26.4	
Once	6	1.5	166	40.3	197	47.8	43	10.4	0.001
Many times	3	2.8	37	34.6	60	56.1	7	6.5	
Always	2	3.3	22	36.7	31	51.7	5	8.3	
The teacher talked to him/her about harassing one of the pupils									
Never	26	2.9	375	41.3	308	33.9	199	21.9	
Once/month	7	4.9	41	28.5	84	58.3	12	8.3	0.001
Once/week	2	2.3	17	19.8	63	73.3	4	4.7	
Always	7	9	20	25.6	43	55.1	8	10.3	
An adult talked to him/her in the house about harassing one of the pupils									
Never	32	3.5	353	38.9	321	35.4	201	22.2	
Once/month	5	2.7	69	36.9	98	52.4	15	8	0.001
Once/week	2	2.5	23	29.1	47	59.5	7	8.9	
Always	3	7	8	18.6	32	74.4	-	-	

Bullying items	Bullyer		Bullied		Bullyer/ Bullied		Non-victim		P-value
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Think he/she can harass pupils who don't like									
Never	19	6.1	95	30.6	147	47.4	49	15.8	
Once	19	2.5	325	42.1	266	34.5	162	21	
Many times	1	1.2	21	24.4	60	69.8	4	4.7	0.001
Always	3	6.3	12	25	25	52.1	8	16.7	
Know that one of pupils at his/her age had been harassed									
Never	17	3.4	190	37.8	194	38.6	101	20.1	
Once	7	11.5	4	6.6	45	73.8	5	8.2	
Many times	10	2.9	134	39.4	134	39.4	62	18.2	0.001
Always	8	2.6	125	39.9	125	39.9	55	17.6	
Felt afraid that one of the pupils will harass him/her									
Never	6	3.3	57	31.1	88	48.1	32	17.5	
Once	32	3.7	333	38.4	321	37	181	20.9	
Many times	3	2.6	40	34.8	63	54.8	9	7.8	0.001
Always	1	2	23	45.1	26	51	1	2	

or relational aggression, with gender-based bullying also observed (boys are more often perpetrators than girls), and most bullies are also victims [18, 21].

Likewise, the present study is nearly consistent with previous studies on the roles of bullying [3, 4, 14, 15]. On the other hand, this result disagrees with another study in India (2021), which found that 11.2% of a bully, 32.4% of victims, 16.7% of bully-victim, and 39.7% of not bully non-victims [22]. Another study found that bully-victims made up the largest group with 11.3% of children, while 9.7% reported to be victims and 7.1% reported to be bullies, respectively [9].

According to socio-demographics, the results were consistent with the previous study in Iraq, which reported that 40.9% were from the fifth class, 27.8% were in the sixth class, and 46.3% of the study sample were males and 53.7% were females, respectively [3]. As well, compatible with other recent studies in Egypt [23], the study revealed that the highest percentage (53.2%) was in age groups 10–11 years.

The majority of participants had no history of years of failure, this result agrees with a study that was done in Saudi Arabia in 2021, which found that 519 (93%) had no history of years of failure [4]. This might be due to the fact that the schools in the city center may offer a higher level of education compared to those in rural areas, which could contribute to a lower failure rate. Similarly, a study conducted in Egypt revealed that 32% of the participants belonged to the middle class within their family [23]. Also, the results indicate that the highest percentage (45.6%) discovered that one of the students in class hated him/her, 38.4% were harassed, and 36.9% were hit, pushed or kicked by one of the students; 34.2% discovered that his/her money or belongings may be taken; 33.8% made fun of him/her, and 32.5% called by a name he/she bothers him/her, with a mean ± SD of 36.53 ± 4.15 to the overall assessment. This can be due to several reasons, such as children themselves (personality traits for children with a desire for dominance or some bullies may have low self-esteem and bully others to feel better about themselves). And/or the family dynamics (children who have experienced abuse at home may exhibit bullying behavior as a way of coping with their trauma). Parental behavior (children who witness or experience aggressive behavior at home may mimic these actions at school or authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles can contribute to bullying behavior in children). Our findings are inconsistent with a recent study from Turkey [24].

Finally, this study shows a strong relationship between bullying items and the prevalence of bullying roles except the number of close friends in class. Our results agree with the other research findings that pupils who have a positive attitude towards school and their education have a lower chance of being bullied than students who have negative feelings towards school [12]. This could be due to the positive and supportive environment in school, which acts as a buffer against bullying behaviors, Studies showed that students who had positive attitudes toward school were less often subjected to bullying. Another study in 2019, reported a positive school climate decreases the likelihood of bullying victimization and improves the climate for students [1].

The study had several limitations, including its reliance on self-reported data on bullying victimization, which may be biased due to underreporting or overreporting by pupils. Additionally, it lacks measures of mental health and psychological profiles. Third, the cross-sectional design prevents the establishment of causal relationships. Finally, the study limited the sample to schools in Najaf City, potentially misrepresenting the experiences of students in other Iraqi regions.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of bullying was 81.7% among pupils in Al-Najaf City. Meanwhile, the bullying roles were distributed as 3.5% bullyer, 37.3% bullied, and 41% bullyer/bullied. Teachers should dedicate part of the class period to discussing the problems and harmful effects of bullying, emphasizing the benefits of tolerance and harmony among students. Additionally, they should support the educational strategies set by the education committee to curb aggressive and violent behavior in schools.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS
Acknowledgments

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The Research Ethics Committee of the Council of the College of Health and Medical Technologies in Kufa granted all necessary clearances and ethical approvals. Informed consent was obtained from guardians of students who accept to participate in the current study.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable (no individual personal data included).

Availability of Data and Material

Data generated during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

All of the listed authors were significantly, directly, and intellectually contributed to the work. The authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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