

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of youths are estimated to be subject to bullying in U.S. schools. GAO was asked to address (1) what is known about the prevalence of school bullying and its effects on victims, (2) approaches selected states and local school districts are taking to combat school bullying, (3) legal options federal and selected state governments have in place when bullying leads to allegations of discrimination, and (4) key federal agencies' coordination efforts to combat school bullying. GAO reviewed research on the prevalence and effects on victims; analyzed state bullying laws, and school district bullying policies; and interviewed officials in 8 states and 6 school districts. States were selected based on various characteristics, including student enrollment, and their definitions of bullying. Also, GAO reviewed selected relevant federal and state civil rights laws, and interviewed officials from Education, HHS, and Justice.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Education compile information about state civil rights laws and procedures that relate to bullying, and inform complainants about state legal options; Education, HHS, and Justice develop information about bullied demographic groups in their surveys; and assess whether legal protections are adequate for these groups. Education disagreed with our first recommendation and we clarified it to address some of their concerns. Education is considering our second recommendation, agreed with our third, and provided information on efforts related to the last. HHS agreed with our recommendations. Justice did not provide a written response.

View [GAO-12-349](#). For more information, contact Linda Calbom at (206) 287-4809 or calboml@gao.gov.

SCHOOL BULLYING

Extent of Legal Protections for Vulnerable Groups Needs to Be More Fully Assessed

What GAO Found

School bullying is a serious problem, and research shows that it can have detrimental outcomes for victims, including adverse psychological and behavioral outcomes. According to four nationally representative surveys conducted from 2005 to 2009, an estimated 20 to 28 percent of youth, primarily middle and high school-aged youths, reported they had been bullied during the survey periods. However, differences in definitions and questions posed to youth respondents make it difficult to discern trends and affected groups. For example, the surveys did not collect demographic information by sexual orientation or gender identity. The Departments of Education (Education) and Health and Human Services (HHS) are partially addressing the issue of inconsistent definitions by collaborating with other federal departments and subject matter experts to develop a uniform definition of bullying that can be used for research purposes. However, gaps in knowledge about the extent of bullying of youths in key demographic groups remain.

According to Education, as of April 2012, 49 states have adopted school bullying laws. The laws in the 8 states that GAO reviewed vary in who is covered and the requirements placed on state agencies and school districts. For example, 6 of the states cover a mix of different demographic groups, referred to as protected classes, such as race and sex or gender, in their bullying laws, while 2 states do not include any protected classes. With respect to school districts, each of the 6 districts GAO studied adopted policies that, among other things, prohibit bullying and describe the potential consequences for engaging in the behavior. Also, school district officials told GAO that they developed approaches to prevent and respond to bullying. For example, several school officials said they implemented a prevention-oriented framework to promote positive school cultures. Both state and local officials expressed concerns about various issues, including how best to address incidents that occur outside of school.

Federal civil rights laws can be used to provide protections against bullying in certain circumstances, but certain vulnerable groups are not covered and therefore have no recourse at the federal level. For example, federal agencies lack jurisdiction under civil rights statutes to pursue discrimination cases based solely on socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. While some state civil rights laws provide protections to victims of bullying that go beyond federal law, federal complainants whose cases are dismissed for lack of jurisdiction are not always informed about the possibility of pursuing claims at the state level.

Three federal departments—Education, HHS, and the Department of Justice (Justice)—have established coordinated efforts to carry out research and broadly disseminate information on bullying to the public, including establishment of a central website and an informational campaign to raise awareness about bullying. In addition to these efforts, Education has issued information about how federal civil rights laws can be used to address bullying of protected classes of youths and is conducting a comprehensive study of state bullying laws and how selected school districts are implementing them. However, no similar information is being gathered on state civil rights laws and procedures that could be helpful in assessing the adequacy of legal protections against school bullying.