This paper explores the effects of state-level anti-bullying legislation on bullying outcomes for youth in United States schools. Bullying has gained national attention in the United States during the last decade. This has been spurred on by the exponential increase in use of the internet and social media by youth as well as several high-profile bullying suicide cases. Because of the multitude of concerns surrounding bullying, many schools and all 50 state legislatures in the U.S. have adopted policies and laws with the goal of decreasing bullying. By 2015, all fifty states had passed anti-bullying legislation (although there is still no federal definition or law against bullying).

Criminal justice researchers have paid more attention to this area in response to these growing concerns, especially examining the connections between bullying, delinquency risk, and mental health. Research suggests that being involved in bullying as a victim or perpetrator can have many negative future consequences. For example, studies show perpetrators of bullying are significantly more likely to engage in violent crime (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012; Farrington & Ttofi 2011). Research also indicates that bullying perpetration is associated with a high-frequency of chronic offending pattern later in life (Piquero et al., 2013), and with self-reported delinquency (Farrington et al., 2011). Being a victim of bullying also increases risk of violence perpetration later in life (Ttofi et al., 2012). Bullying victimization is also associated with negative emotional and mental health outcomes, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety,
self-harm behavior, and suicidal ideation (Arseneault et al., 2010; Forero et al., 1999; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Nansel et al., 2004).

Anti-bullying laws were rapidly adopted between 2009 and 2012 with the belief that such legislation might improve outcomes for both perpetrators and victims of bullying. For victims, legislation has focused on increasing awareness, mandating reporting, and implementing school policies to prevent and take actions against bullying. For perpetrators, the hope of legislation is that it reduces the risk of future violence as well as future contact of juveniles with the criminal justice system. The research regarding the effectiveness of legislation on these goals is equivocal. Bradshaw et al. (2011) for example finds that school officials and teachers are skeptical of the effectiveness of anti-bullying legislation. Nikolaou (2017), on the other hand, argues that legislation can works especially when harsh sanctions are involved. Many studies on the impacts of anti-bullying legislation are state-specific, and focus on specific aspects of certain anti-bullying laws, or on the perspectives of teacher and school administrators. To add to this growing research, this study evaluates, at a national level, the effects of anti-bullying legislation on bullying outcomes in schools in the United States using self-report data from high school students.

Using a mixed-effects logistic regression design, I estimate the odds of students reporting having been involved in four bullying outcomes at school. The four bullying outcomes include physical fighting at school, bringing weapons to school, missing school due to feeling unsafe, and being threatened or injured by a peer at school. Models show that the odds of students reporting being involved in these outcomes decrease when anti-bullying legislation is in place, though the relationships are modest. The study raises questions about the exact mechanisms by
which bullying outcomes are decreasing, as well as potential topics for future research in law, policy, and juvenile or school crimes.

Works Cited:


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