

Fear of bullying affects more than a quarter of 12-13 year olds

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The young people that are afraid of going to school

One quarter of 12-13 year old boys, and one third of girls in the same age group, are *sometimes, often, or very often* afraid of going to school because of bullying.

These figures were derived from Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ) surveys carried out in 1995 and 1996. The Version 17 questionnaire used in this work was the first of our survey instruments to contain a question about bullying, and its inclusion arose out of increasing concern about the level of bullying in some schools and the distress it caused.

Fig. 1 shows how the section of the questionnaire containing the question appeared.

What is 'bullying'?

We deliberately did not attempt to define

bullying, since we were more concerned with its effect. In an indirect way we were defining it as *something generated by the other young people that could make the person afraid of going to school.*

Work reported at the recent Kingston conference on Preventing and Responding to Bullying did, however, examine the question of what constituted bullying. In addition to threatened or actual physical assault, other anti-social behaviour towards an individual, such as taunting or gesturing, interfering with their belongings, sending them unpleasant notes, or even ignoring them altogether, was considered by some researchers to amount to bullying.

This professional view is doubtless more sophisticated than that of the young people. It would be helpful to discover what kind of anti-social behaviour in this list, or perhaps outside it, young people of different age and either gender find the most distressing.

Where does bullying happen?

Within the school gates, or on the journey to and from school? Again referring to the Kingston report, approximately 30% of the respondents from across the whole age range in four secondary schools reported having been bullied at least once in school during the previous term, and more than 10% had been bullied at least once on their journey during the same time interval.

Within the school, as well as the playground,

Fig. 1. The location of the 'bullying' question in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, Version 17.

83	How do you rate the following in the area where you live?								
	0 = Very poor	1 = Poor	2 = Adequate						
	3 = Good	4 = Very good							
83a	Safety when going out after dark	0	1	2	3	4			
83b	Safety when going out during the day	0	1	2	3	4			
84	Do you ever feel afraid of going to school because of bullying?								
	0 = Never	1 = Sometimes	2 = Often	3 = Very often	0	1	2	3	
85	When you go out do you ever feel afraid of being physically attacked?								
	0 = Never	1 = Sometimes	2 = Often	3 = Very often	0	1	2	3	
86	Do you ever 'carry' anything with you to protect yourself?								
	You may circle more than one answer								
	A = I never carry anything	B = Sound alarm	C = Sprays						
	D = Weapon with a blade	E = Weapon that fires air pellets							
	F = Weapon that fires bullets	G = Other (please specify)							

Table 1. The percentage of young people that had different levels of anxiety about going to school because of bullying.

	Year 7		Year 8		Year 9		Year 10		Year 11	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
<i>Fear going to school</i>										
Never	72.0	67.3	73.4	65.4	80.3	72.4	80.4	70.9	84.1	82.8
Sometimes	23.4	29.1	21.3	28.2	15.1	21.9	15.7	24.5	11.6	15.1
Often	3.1	2.7	2.9	3.3	2.6	2.0	2.7	2.4	3.4	1.6
Very often	1.6	0.9	2.4	3.1	2.0	3.7	1.1	2.1	1.0	0.5
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Fear at least 'sometimes'</i>	28.0	32.7	26.6	34.6	19.7	27.6	19.6	29.1	15.9	17.2
Number of valid responses	321	333	2367	2622	304	297	2039	2088	207	192

the classroom and journeys between classrooms can also be threatening. This could be a particular problem in schools with split sites.

'Fear of being bullied'

The HRBQ question asks the young people about their fear of being bullied when they go to school. This fear could be based on previous experience of being bullied. It could also be based on what they have seen happen to others, even though they themselves have not been involved.

Who does the bullying?

The Kingston work suggests that reported incidents most often involve a bully of the same age as the victim, although they could be older or, more rarely, younger. More than 20% of the secondary pupils surveyed claimed to have bullied someone else at school at least once during the previous term.

Some actions by teachers or other members of staff might also, perhaps, be considered as 'bullying'.

Our report concentrates upon the characteristics of those who fear being bullied rather than those who bully. However, we plan to rectify this omission in the next revision of the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire. If the ratio of 'bullies' to 'victims' is as high as the Kingston report suggests, then the model of a few anti-social individuals making life miserable for a much larger group of vulnerable peers may need to be modified.

On the other hand, bullies and victims may have different understanding of what 'bullying' means. Is it possible to be bullied without realising it, or to believe you have been bullied when no one meant harm? Perhaps the second possibility is more likely than the first.

Absentees and boosters

All survey methods involve sources of error, and our annual *Young People* reports, based on data collected during the previous year, examine these closely and should be read by anyone wishing to work with our data.

Young people cannot answer the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire if they are not at school when the survey takes place. Reasons for absence include illness, special holiday arrangements, sporting representation, and of course truancy. In the context of absenteeism through fear of bullying, one other possible sampling bias is immediately obvious: the young people that are particularly afraid of being bullied may be absent. If we call these *refusers* it may help to distinguish them from truants — pupils who stay away from school because they have better things to do.

The percentage of refusers is likely to be highest among the group that would record high levels of fear, and therefore the data will tend to under-record this category of respondents.

A common comment about boys in particular is that they are tempted to exaggerate and boast about 'naughty' behaviours. However, it seems unlikely that many, or any, would boast about being afraid of going to school because of bullying. There may thus be more that fear bullying than report it. Our extensive experience of young people's attitudes to Health Related Behaviour surveys suggests that their motivation to be honest is high, as their answers are non-attributable and the relevance of the exercise is made clear by the supervising staff. However, any tendency to minimise their anxiety about bullying will be added to the 'refuser' error in *under-estimating* the true level of concern about bullying.

The context of the question

The 'bullying' question was introduced into Version 17 in 1995 in the context of increasing concern about personal safety. Since its inception in the late 1970s, the questionnaire has been regularly revised and expanded to reflect the widening concept of health-related behaviour, as well as changing priorities and changes in the young people's lifestyles with the passing years. Computer games, video films and deodorants are just three examples of consumer products that have come prominently on to the scene since HRBQ began, and changes in levels of smoking, and the increased contact with drugs, have been monitored.

Rising concern about personal safety had already led to some questions being included in Version 16 for the first time. In Version 17, to make room for other material, these questions were cut down and the specific problem of bullying, as well as general personal safety, was addressed.

The situation of the 'bullying' question, number 84 in Fig. 1, which immediately follows a question about feelings of personal safety and itself precedes one about fear of attack, does place it in the context of physical violence, and may thus influence the respondent's interpretation of what 'bullying' means.

How many fear being bullied?

Table 1 shows how the young people in our 1995-96 sample responded to question 84. It shows that more girls than boys fear being bullied at school.

Take particular note of the generated values for *at least 'sometimes'*. The highest percentages are found among the Year 7 and 8 pupils. This agrees with other research and observation showing that bullying is most widespread in the junior classes.

In this report we concentrate on the Year 8 pupils, because their level of concern about bullying is high and the sample is substantial. Therefore, please bear in mind that the percentages within this group that fear going to school because of bullying at least 'sometimes' are:

BOYS: 26.6%
GIRLS: 34.6%

What kind of people fear being bullied?

To examine this question, we shall compare the responses by the 'fear at least sometimes' and 'never fear' groups to other questions in the HRBQ, to see what differences there are and to consider their significance. To save space we shall refer to the first category as the 'fear bullying' group.

However, the reader needs to bear in mind that the histograms show only the percentages within each category of answer that relate to fear of bullying, and do not say anything about the other behaviour being examined.

For example, Table 2 links fear of being bullied at school to fear of being physically attacked when out and about. The basic data are:

<i>Fear physical attack?</i>	<i>Fear bullying</i>	
	Boys	Girls
Never	17.0	24.5
Sometimes	36.7	35.0
Often/very often	65.8	57.3

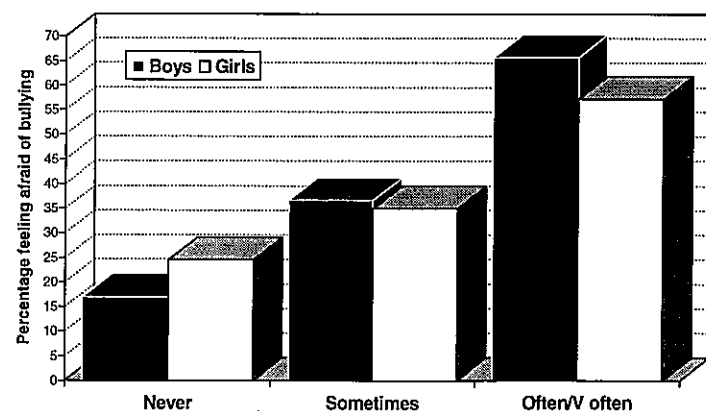
This means that of the group that *never* fear physical attack, 17.0% of the boys and 24.5% of the girls fear bullying. Of those who *often or very often* fear physical attack, 65.8% and 57.3% respectively fear bullying.

But it would be helpful to know what proportion of the young people come into the *never*, *sometimes*, and *often/very often* categories with respect to fear of physical attack when out and about. They are shown here in parentheses, for the boys and girls respectively:

<i>Fear physical attack?</i>	<i>Fear bullying</i>	
	Boys	Girls
Never (61.2, 34.1)	17.0	24.5
Sometimes (32.1, 52.2)	36.7	35.0
Often/very often (6.7, 13.7)	65.8	57.3

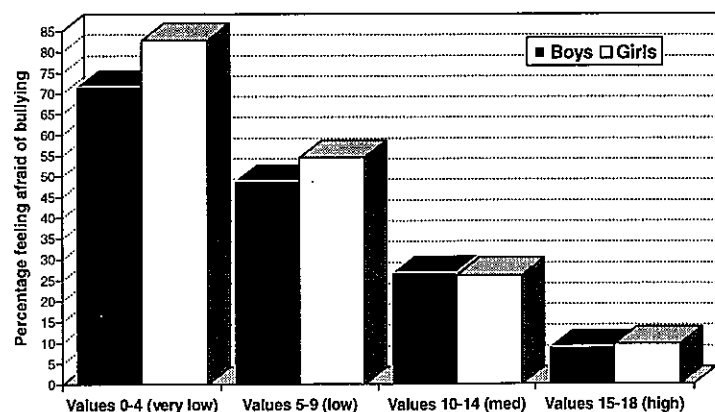
The extra figures show that the *often/very often* group contains the fewest number of young people.

To examine these supplementary behaviours in more detail, the reader is recommended to study the Unit's annual report *Young People in 1995* (in preparation). However, the relevant percentages are included in the tables that follow, in light figures to distinguish them from the percentage within each group that fear bullying, which are printed in bold figures.



Fear physical attack?	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
Never	17.0	24.5
Sometimes	36.7	35.0
Often/very often	65.8	57.3

Table 2. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to how often they fear physical attack when they go out in their neighbourhood (light figures). Thus, of the 61.2% of boys that never fear physical attack when they go out, 17.0% fear bullying.



Self-esteem score	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
0-4 (very low)	71.7	82.9
5-9 (low)	48.9	54.5
10-14 (medium)	26.8	26.1
15-18 (high)	9.0	9.6

Table 3. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their self-esteem score (light figures). Thus, of the 2.3% of boys with very low self-esteem, 71.7% fear bullying

Fear of physical attack

The link with fear of bullying is very clear, and perhaps comes as no surprise (Table 2).

Most of the small percentage of boys and girls that fear physical attack *often or very often* come into the 'fear bullying' category.

However, it is interesting that of the 61.2% of boys and 34.1% of girls that *never* fear physical attack, 17.0% and 24.5% respectively still fear bullying.

Does this mean that, for them, bullying does not imply physical attack? Or that going to school is not the same as 'going out'?

Perhaps they feel safer outside school than within it?

Self-esteem

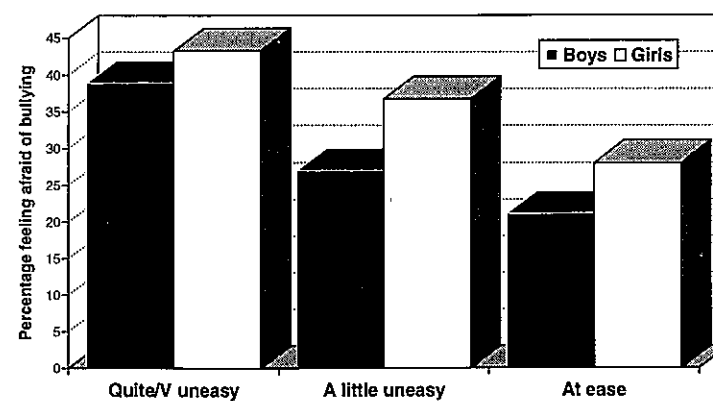
The self-esteem score (Table 3) has been derived by asking the young people to respond to a set of nine questions, with a maximum total score of 18, about confidence in themselves, their parents, and their friends.

The small percentages of boys and girls that score very low measures of self-esteem include very high percentages of individuals that fear bullying.

Those in the highest self-esteem group include far smaller percentages that fear bullying, but even so they include almost 10% of the young people.

One can imagine, or in many cases clearly recall, the destructive effects of physical or verbal bullying on feelings of self-confidence and self-worth.

We may also reflect upon two different scenarios. A person who feels 'low' invites abuse and is still further bruised by the encounter, whereas those who feel good and confident do not 'invite' attack, and should they happen to be exposed to it they can easily deflect it or contain it with no personal damage.



Meeting opposite sex	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
Quite/very uneasy	38.9	43.3
A little uneasy	27.0	36.7
At ease	21.1	28.0

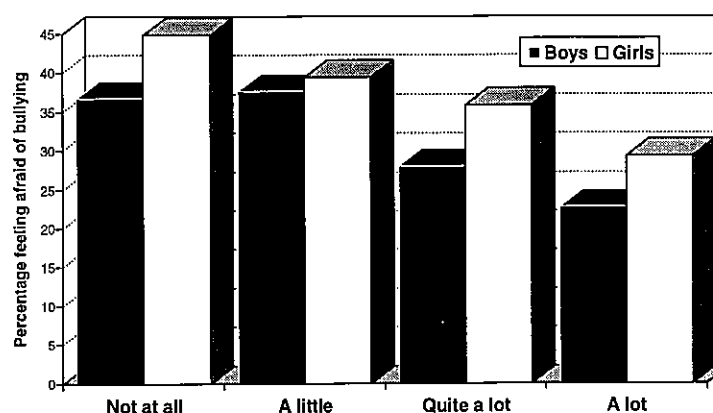
Table 4. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their confidence when meeting new people of their own age and opposite sex (light figures). Thus, of the 18.1% of boys that are quite uneasy or very uneasy, 38.9% fear bullying

Meeting a member of the opposite sex

About one in five of the boys and girls report being *very uneasy* or *quite uneasy* when meeting people of their own age and opposite sex for the first time (Table 4).

The connection between confidence and fearing bullying is clear for both genders. The higher the level of confidence, the lower the proportion that fear bullying.

A link with self-esteem is suggested by these figures.



Like physical activities	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
Not at all	36.7	44.8
A little	37.6	39.4
Quite a lot	28.0	35.8
A lot	22.7	29.3

Table 5. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their enjoyment of physical activities (light figures). Thus, of the 4.4% of boys that do not enjoy physical activities at all, 36.7% fear bullying

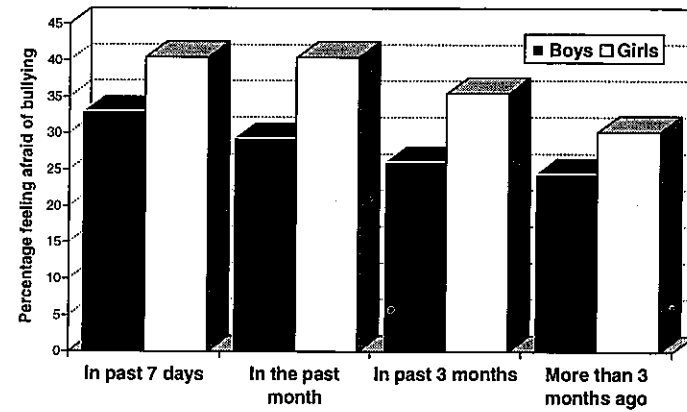
Attitudes to physical activity

Fewer than 5% of the boys and girls reported no enjoyment of physical activities at all, and 61.1% of boys, compared with 38.0% of girls, enjoyed them *a lot* (Table 5).

The lowest proportion of boys and girls that fear bullying are found within the groups that find most enjoyment in physical activity.

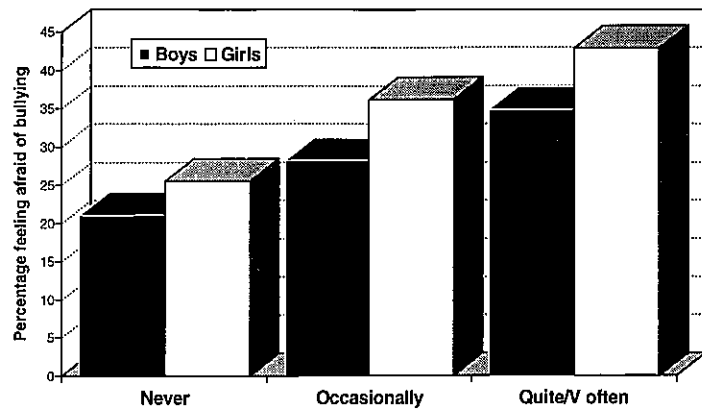
If we assume that enjoyment of physical activity is positively linked to health, strength and mobility, then voluntary participation in sports makes it less likely that people will be physically abused and more likely that they will be 'physically respected'.

It is interesting that a similar connection is found within another question asking the respondents to estimate their own fitness. This suggests that perception of one's own physical wellbeing also conveys 'messages' to others about personal vulnerability.



Last doctor visit	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
In past 7 days	8.5	10.0
In past month	20.2	20.8
In past 3 months	21.4	23.0
Over 3 months ago	49.9	46.2

Table 6. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to the time since their last visit to the doctor (light figures). Thus, of the 8.5% of boys that visited the doctor in the past 7 days, 33.0% fear bullying



Breathing difficulties	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
Never	43.3	32.6
Occasionally	36.0	40.5
Quite/very often	20.8	26.8

Table 7. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to any breathing difficulties they have when they run (light figures). Thus, of the 43.3% of boys that never experience breathing difficulties, 21.1% fear bullying

Visits to the doctor

Table 6 shows that over 50% of the Year 8 boys and girls had visited their doctor at least once within the last three months. Assuming that the intervals recorded here are an indication of average frequency, then the most frequent visitors will include the highest percentage of those who fear bullying.

Those who visit the doctor most frequently are the most likely group to be absent from school through illness. They may therefore be under-represented in the data, just as those who are the most fearful of going to school because of bullying are under-represented.

Even though the young people that fear bullying are more likely than the others to be visiting their doctor, it is unlikely that they will be presenting this anxiety as the reason for their visit. They are, however, looking for support.

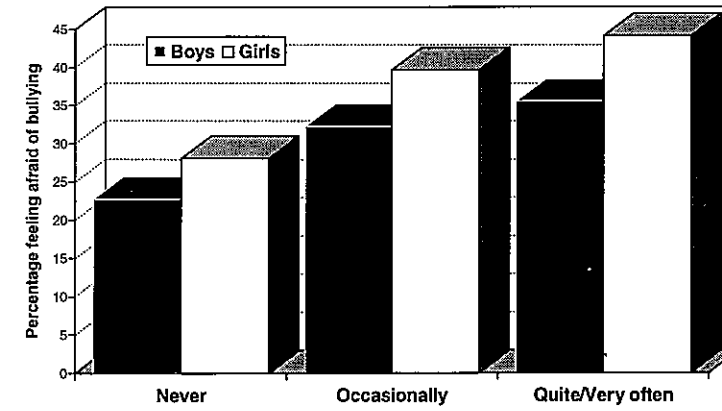
Should doctors be asking them about worries at school?

Breathing difficulties

Large percentages of boys and girls are included in each category (Table 7). The stepwise increase in association between breathing difficulties and experience of fear of bullying is clear for both sexes.

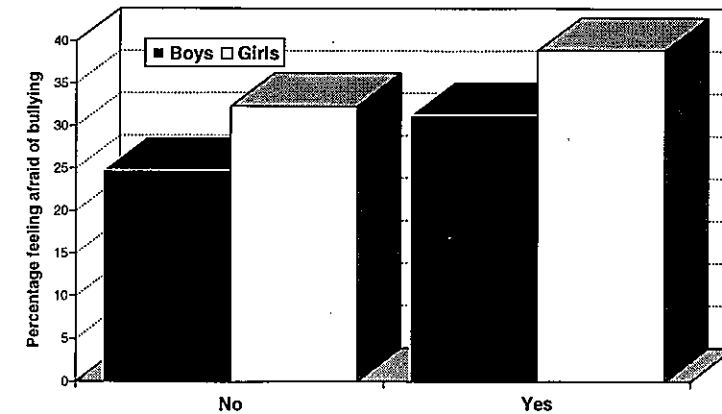
The overlap between those who report that they 'wheeze' and have trouble breathing when they run, and those known to be suffering from asthma, has been reported in publications such as *Asthma in the Classroom*, available from the Asthma Training Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

If breathing difficulties are being brought on or exacerbated by anxiety, or by being chased in earnest rather than in fun, then these alternatives could help to explain the link with fear of being bullied.



Night cough	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
Never	63.1	48.2
Occasionally	30.1	41.9
Quite/very often	6.8	9.9

Table 8. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to the frequency with which they are disturbed by a night cough (light figures). Thus, of the 63.1% of boys that are never disturbed, 22.8% fear bullying.



Close friend smokes	Fear bullying	
	Boys	Girls
No	72.3	66.2
Yes	27.7	33.8

Table 9. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to whether they have a close friend that smokes (light figures). Thus, of the 72.3% of boys that have a close friend that smokes, 24.8% fear bullying.

Disturbed rest due to night cough

More girls (9.9%) than boys (6.8%) report disturbed nights quite often or very often (Table 8).

The stepwise increase between the frequency of disturbed nights and the fear of being bullied is clear for both sexes.

Disturbed sleep is associated with worry and anxiety. Those who sleep soundly may not cough, or may not know that they cough. Many sound sleepers snore!

Those who lie awake at night worrying may remember coughing as well as worrying.

Having a close friend that smokes

Table 9 is one of several pieces of analysis revealing a positive link between being close to smokers and fearing bullying. The associations are remarkable, and perhaps unexpected.

Why do those young people associated with smokers have more fear of being bullied? The suggestion that the close friend does the bullying raises obvious difficulties!

There is also a positive link between fear of bullying and the number of smokers in the person's home. In addition, we discover that the young people with the greatest belief in the power of advertising to persuade people to start smoking are also the most likely to fear bullying.

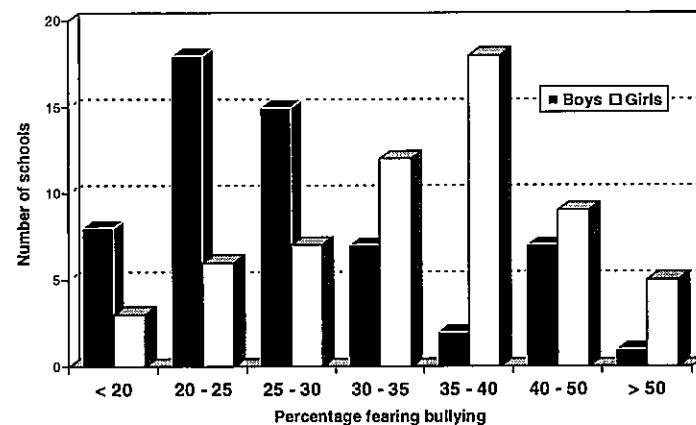
Missing connections

There are connections or correlations that people suggest as probable or obvious, sometimes from their personal experience or that of their children. For example:

"Sean was very small for his age until he was about 12, and then he began to grow. He suffered from being bullied until this growth spurt which put him ahead of the others, and he has had no trouble since."

The data do support this expectation with respect to height. For both boys and girls, increase in height is clearly linked with a decrease in the prevalence of fearing being bullied, the shorter children being more likely to fear being bullied.

Weight seems to show no consistent relationship with fear of bullying, although we can perhaps recall knowing some obese people being ridiculed and persecuted, and other obese people dealing out the punishment. This, perhaps, contributes to the observation of no con-



	<20	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-49	50+
Boys	8	18	15	7	2	7	1
Girls	3	6	7	12	18	9	5

Table 10. The number of schools in the sample within each 'fear bullying' percentage band for Year 8 boys and girls. Note that two of the 60 schools were girls-only.

sistent connection between the variables.

Connections between travelling on the school bus, affluence, 'broken' homes, ethnic background, and being the only child in the family might be expected to reveal connections, but do not. The position in the family of the child does, however, show an effect. In a family of more than one child it is the youngest one that is less likely to fear being bullied at school. Perhaps the older sibling can be a source of protection?

Schools are different...

The 60 surveys across the country (representing 7 Health Authorities), on which this report is based, were part of the standard Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire service to secondary schools that the Schools Health Education has been running for more than a decade. Each survey is carried out within a timetable period, and provides a wide range of reliable 'lifestyle' data for the year group selected. The data are fed back to each school for local use, such as curriculum review, staff training and liaison with parents.

Typically each school is one of a group of schools (in this report ranging in size from 5 to 17), supported and co-ordinated by an external team responsible for organising the survey. The project is usually led by Health Authority personnel, but Education Authority staff are often

involved as well. Within each participating school, the survey data supports curriculum review and staff development, and can be an excellent teaching resource. For the survey co-ordinator, the results may be used to:

- (a) Identify or confirm priorities.
- (b) Underpin economic planning.
- (c) Inform appropriate siting and distribution of personnel.
- (d) Promote the building or reinforcing of positive links with schools.

Schools receive their own data, but the external co-ordinator has access to the total database and therefore enjoys an 'overview' of the variations between behaviours in the different communities represented in the survey. From much of our work we have discovered that the overall summary of data from a sufficient number of schools in one Health Authority Region or Health Authority District is a good predictor of results in another part of the country. Evidence for this is presented in *Young People in 1994*.

However, another discovery that invariably emerges is that, for most behaviours, there is wide variation between results from different schools in the same regional or district survey. Table 10 shows the number of schools in the sample that recorded different 'fear of bullying' levels among their Year 8 pupils.

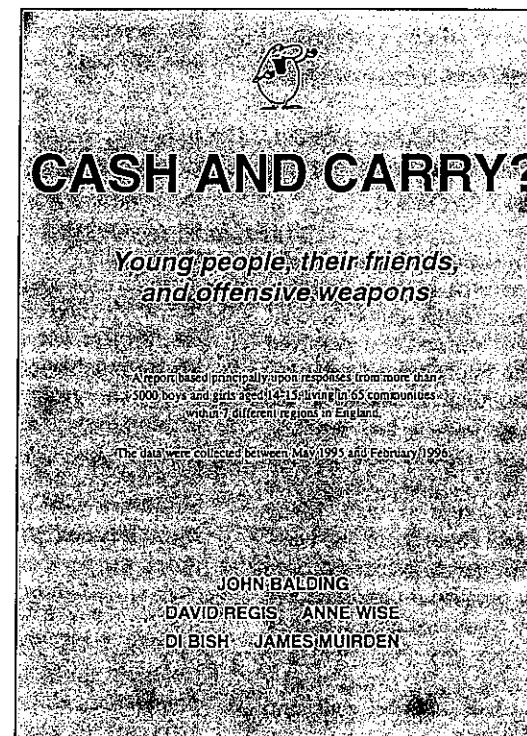
Notice that the percentages for the boys accumulate towards the left of the histogram, and those for the girls towards the right. This distribution reflects the overall difference in the percentages of boys and girls reporting fear of going to school because of bullying (26.6% and 34.6% respectively).

Looking at the right-hand end of the histogram, we encounter schools where *more than half the pupils are at least sometimes afraid of going because of bullying*. In only one school is this the case for boys, but in five schools (1 in 12) the girls register this level of fear. This fact brings out vividly how the threat of being bullied is a much more acute concern for the girls in this age group.

Two girls' schools are included in the sample. One reveals an average level of fear, the other a lower-than-average level.

Analysis of the 58 secondary comprehensive schools in the sample shows that in many cases the boys' and girls' relative levels of fear are in agreement, but in some schools one can be higher than average and the other lower than average.

Fig. 2. The Unit's report on young people and carrying personal protection.



The vast majority of the behaviours measured within this wide-ranging HRBQ survey are attributable particularly to the environment in which the young people live, rather than the effects of the school. However, this measure of fear of bullying is definitely school-connected.

We believe that the climate of bullying in any one school need not remain fixed. The article in this issue by Bill Rogers shows that improvement is possible. The observed variations between schools and between genders within one school may support this view.

Carrying personal protection

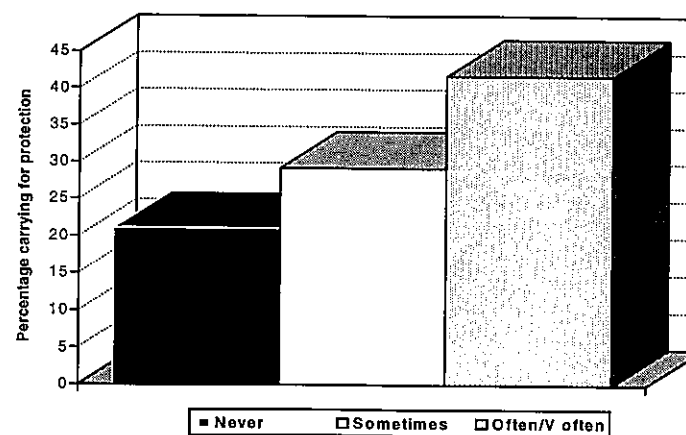
As Fig. 1 shows, Version 17 of the HRBQ introduced questions about personal safety and carrying 'protection' when out and about in the neighbourhood.

The first results of this research were published in the Unit's report *Cash and Carry?*, available for £10.00 including postage, and the surprising levels of potentially 'offensive' protection being carried about by young people attracted nationwide attention.

Only a small percentage report carrying protection when they go to school (as opposed to out in the street, in night clubs, etc.) but Table 11 shows a very clear link between the level of Year 8 boys' fear of bullying at school and carrying personal protection at any time. Of those who *never* fear bullying, 21.1% sometimes carry personal protection, compared with 29.3% that *sometimes* fear bullying and 41.8% of those who fear it *often or very often*.

The statistics for the girls do not show clear connections, and at this age the numbers involved in carrying protection are far smaller than for the boys.

Although few report carrying protection to school, the link between fear of bullying and carrying protection in places other than school is 'stepwise' and clear. One might assume that those fearful of being bullied are more likely to carry for protection rather than for offensive action.



	Fear bullying		Carry protection	
	Boys	Boys	Boys	Boys
Never	73.4	21.1	21.1	21.1
Sometimes	21.3	29.3	29.3	29.3
Often/very often	5.2	41.8	41.8	41.8

Table 11. The percentage of Year 8 boys that carry protection (bold type), according to their fear of bullying (light type). Thus, of the 73.4% that never fear bullying, 21.1% carry protection at least sometimes.

The Unit's report, from which these extracts are taken, is entitled *BULLY OFF!* It will be published at the end of June, price £10.00 post free from the Unit.