

Peer Victimisation

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This chapter addresses the problem of peer victimisation, which is the most common category of victimisation experienced by children and young people in Poland (Włodarczyk & Makaruk, 2013; Włodarczyk et al., 2018). It may occur in schools, on the way to and from school, on the internet or through cell phones (Komendant-Brodowska, 2014), but also outside the school context, when the perpetrators may be siblings or strangers.

One distinctive feature of peer victimisation or bullying is that there are often witnesses involved (Salmivalli, 2010), who may play different roles in the process: assistants of bullies, reinforcers of bullies, onlookers watching the incident, potential defenders of the victim, who empathise with him or her but do not take any action, defenders who stand up for the victim, and uninvolved bystanders (Komendant-Brodowska, 2009). Witnesses' reactions may influence the behaviour of the bully and the situation of those who are victimised. Research shows that most incidents of school bullying take place in the presence of witnesses. When they are just passive onlookers, victimisation tends to continue, but when they oppose the abusive behaviour, it may stop (Rigby, 2007). This chapter will present key definitions of peer victimisation, its determinants, the latest research evidence on the prevalence of victimisation and perpetration in Poland (including in comparison to international evidence), opinions about the problem, and its consequences.

Definitions

There are many definitions of peer victimisation and many different terms used to refer to the problem. Differences in definitions and methodologies may affect the analyses of the problem. Most studies focus on bullying in the school environment and do not include peers in other contexts, such as neighbours and children in the family.

Terms such as aggression, violence, and bullying are used interchangeably, even though the relationships between them are hierarchical (Pyżalski, 2012). The most general term is aggression, which refers to any intentional behaviour meant to do harm to another person (Aronson et al., 2006). Violence is a slightly narrower term. It occurs when the aggressor uses his or her advantage over the victim, whether it is numbers, physical, psychological, or formal advantage (Komendant-Brodowska, 2014). Bullying takes place when someone's behaviour is meant to cause harm or discomfort to another person (intentionality) and occurs systematically (repeatedness), and when the victim is weaker than the perpetrator or perpetrators (imbalance of power; Olweus, 2003). The English term "bullying" is translated into Polish as "school aggression", "peer aggression", "school violence" and "peer violence", which makes it a very broad concept (Pyżalski, 2012). Polish studies use other terms, too, to refer to

this phenomenon, meaning “tormenting”, “harassing”, “intimidating” or “persecuting”.

There are different classifications of bullying or, more widely, peer victimisation. One of them, adopted by the Institute of Educational Research (Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych; Przewłocka, 2015), covers the following categories: verbal (e.g., calling names, sniping, ridiculing), relational (e.g., exclusion from the group, ignoring, turning others against the person), physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, pushing, and jerking), material (e.g., theft, personal property damage), and electronic or cyberbullying (e.g., offensive emails or text messages, posts in social media, sharing images or videos that ridicule or humiliate the victim).

The Empowering Children Foundation's (ECF) repeated *National Survey of the Prevalence and Determinants of Child Maltreatment (Ogólnopolska diagnoza skali i uwarunkowań krzywdzenia dzieci; Włodarczyk et al., 2018)* uses categories of peer victimisation based on the American *Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire*. These include: gang or group assault, physical assault by familiar peers or siblings, bullying, psychological (emotional) bullying, and dating violence. There is also a question about touching of private parts and sexual coercion by a peer, which is considered a form of sexual abuse.

Violence experienced by students at school or in the school environment as a result of gender-related norms and stereotypes and unequal power relations, is referred to as *school-related gender-based violence* (SRGBV; UNESCO, UN Women, 2016).

Determinants

Peer victimisation is determined by many different factors, including individual characteristics of the victimised child and of the perpetrator, as well as the characteristics of the family environment. School bullying is more likely to affect children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families, those differing from others in terms of ethnic or cultural background, children from immigrant families, children with disabilities or physical differences (e.g., over- or underweight), and children whose sexual orientation, identity or expression is not consistent

with traditional sexual norms (UNESCO, 2017), as well as those with poor social skills or a low status in their peer group (Cook et al., 2010). Furthermore, a higher risk of bullying has been reported for children whose parents do not show interest in school life (Przewłocka, 2015), children from troubled families, and those who have been abused by their parents or witnessed violence in the family (Tucker et al., 2020).

Literature on bullying (Ostaszewski, 2012; Przewłocka, 2015) emphasises the significant role of the school climate, i.e., the quality of relations among students, teachers, and parents, the characteristics of the learning and educational environment, physical and emotional safety in the school, and the physical school environment. The problem of bullying is less serious in schools where teachers are perceived as kind, helpful, and showing interest in their students (Przewłocka, 2015), and those that take appropriate preventative measures (Pyżalski, 2012).

Prevalence of peer victimisation

Police statistics

There is a shortage of official data on peer victimisation. Police statistics are limited to incidents occurring in schools and other educational facilities. The most frequently reported offences in police statistics in 2021 were: theft of personal property (664 cases), theft with burglary (275), and bodily injury (260). An analysis of available data shows a sharp decline in the number of all kinds of offences in schools and facilities (Table 1). The greatest (four-fold) decrease has been reported for robbery, theft, and extortion (from 750 cases in 2016 to 176 in 2021). Such comparisons, however, should be made with caution, as during the COVID-19 pandemics in both 2020 and 2021, schools moved their classes online and students spent most of the time at home.

Table 1. Offences reported in 2016–2021 in schools and educational facilities

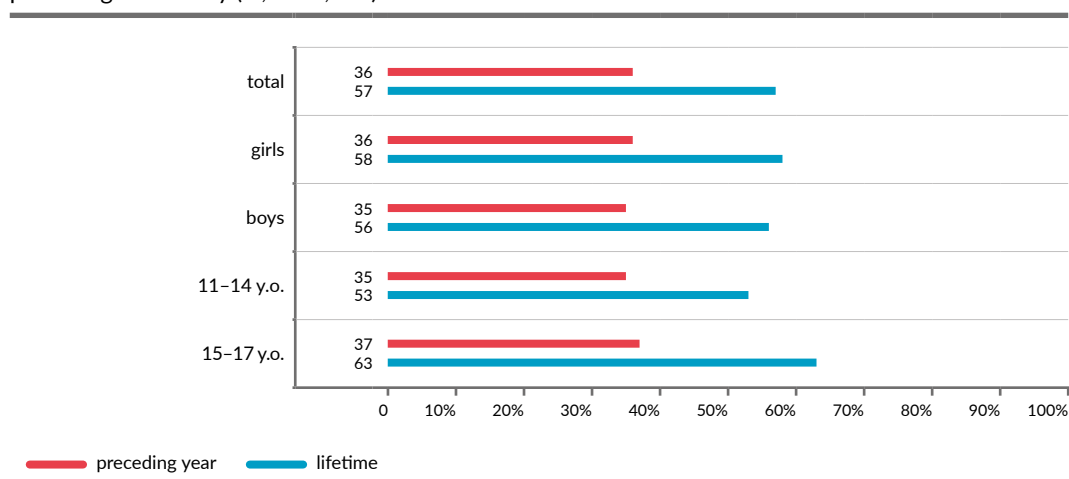
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bodily injury	648	680	665	553	411	260
Simple affray or battery	309	264	236	192	154	107
Rape	31	29	37	29	9	10
Theft with burglary	524	474	451	340	279	275
Theft of personal property	1,743	1,553	1,366	1,241	662	664
Robbery, theft, and extortion	750	792	664	397	223	176

Source: National Police Headquarters, 2022.

Prevalence of peer victimisation in Poland: Data from research

The problem of peer victimisation in a broader sense, going beyond the school context, is presented in the *National Survey of the Prevalence and Determinants of Child Maltreatment* (Włodarczyk et al., 2018), a study conducted repeatedly by the ECF on a national sample of children and young people aged 11–17.

The results of the survey suggest that peer victimisation is the most common form of victimisation experienced by children and adolescents. More than half of the respondents (57%) have experienced it in their lifetime, whereas one third (36%) were victimised by peers in the year preceding the survey (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Experiences of peer victimisation by gender and age in the lifetime and in 12 months preceding the survey (% , N = 1,155)

Source: Włodarczyk et al., 2018.

The most common form of peer victimisation was physical assault (42% of the respondents experienced it at least once in their lifetime, and 23% – in the year preceding the study), followed by emotional bullying (29% and 14%, respectively), group or gang assault (18% and 8%), bullying (14% and 7%), and dating violence (6% and 2%). The percentage of respondents who were sexually abused by a peer (by touching private parts) was 4% in the lifetime and 2% in the year preceding the survey.

Table 2. Experiences of different forms of peer victimisation and sexual abuse by a peer, by gender during the lifetime (% , N = 1,155)

	Girls	Boys	11–14 y.o.	15–17 y.o.	Total
Physical assault by a peer	41%	43%	40%	44%	42%
Emotional bullying	36%	22%	27%	31%	29%
Group assault	17%	19%	15%	21%	18%
Bullying	16%	11%	12%	16%	14%
Dating violence*	4%	8%	4%	7%	6%
Unwanted touch by a peer*	6%	1%	2%	5%	4%

* Questions asked to respondents aged 13–17.

Source: Włodarczyk et al., 2018.

Table 3. Experiences of different forms of peer victimisation and sexual abuse by a peer, by gender in 12 months preceding the survey (% , N = 1,155)

	Girls	Boys	11–14 y.o.	15–17 y.o.	Total
Physical assault by a peer	22%	25%	25%	22%	23%
Emotional bullying	19%	10%	15%	14%	14%
Group assault	7%	8%	7%	9%	8%
Bullying	8%	7%	9%	6%	7%
Dating violence*	1%	3%	1%	4%	2%
Unwanted touch by a peer*	3%	0%	1%	2%	2%

* Questions asked to respondents aged 13–17.

Source: Włodarczyk et al., 2018.

There are gender differences in the prevalence of peer victimisation, but only for some of its categories. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to experience emotional bullying both in their lifetime (36% vs 22%), and in the year preceding the survey (19% vs 10%), whereas for bullying the difference was significant only in the preceding 12 months (16% vs 11%).

Adolescents aged 15–17 were more likely to report experiences of peer victimisation during their lifetime than younger respondents aged 11–14 (63% vs 53%). When it comes to the year preceding the study, however, there

were no significant differences between these age groups, except for dating violence, which was more likely to be reported by older adolescents than by younger children, both in their lifetime (7% vs 4%), and in the preceding year (4% vs 1%).

Pain, bruises, cuts or bone fractures were the most likely to be reported by those who had experienced physical assault by a peer (31%) and dating violence (32%), followed by victims of bullying (20%), group assault (18%) and sexual abuse by a peer (13%). Injuries caused by dating violence were more likely to be reported by girls than by boys (69% vs 13%).

Table 4. Perpetrators of peer victimisation and sexual abuse by a peer

	Brother	Sister	Another relative	Girlfriend, boyfriend, ex-girlfriend, ex-boyfriend	Another familiar peer	I don't want to answer this question
Physical assault (N = 480)	22%	13%	4%	4%	66%	6%
Bullying (N = 332)	7%	5%	7%	5%	81%	7%
Emotional bullying (N = 159)	2%	2%	2%	3%	89%	8%
Touching of private parts by a peer (N = 32)	6%		3%	41%	63%	9%

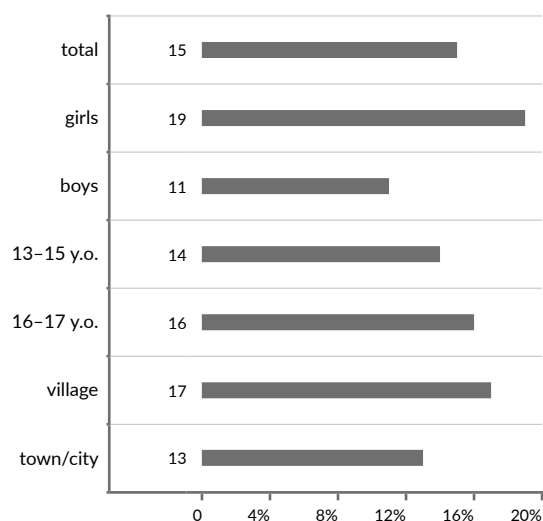
Source: Włodarczyk et al., 2018.

The majority of perpetrators of physical assault, emotional bullying, bullying, and sexual abuse by a peer were familiar peers unrelated to the victim (Table 4; Włodarczyk et al., 2018).

In 2020 the Empowering Children Foundation used an uncomplete version of the Survey questionnaire to study the victimisation and functioning of persons aged 13–17 in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemics¹ (Makaruk et al., 2020). Just like in 2018, peer victimisation turned out to be the most common category of victimisation. Emotional bullying or physical assault by children or adolescents were experienced by 15% of the respondents, with girls being more likely to report such experiences than boys (19% vs 11%; Figure 2). One in 10 respondents (11%) reported to have been intentionally hit by a peer, and one in 16 (6%) experienced emotional abuse by another child or adolescent. Additionally, 1% of the respondents reported to have been sexually abused by a peer in the form of unwanted touch.

¹ From mid-March to the end of June 2020.

Figure 2. Experiences of peer victimisation in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemics, by gender, age, and place of residence (N = 500)



Source: Own analysis, based on: Makaruk et al., 2020.

Unlike the *National Survey*, most studies into peer victimisation focus predominantly on the school environment. In the last two waves of the *Youth survey* (Bożewicz, 2019; Kalka, 2016), a repeated study conducted by the Polish Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), older adolescents (students of the senior year of secondary school) were asked about their experiences of victimisation by other students. The survey covered different forms of peer victimisation, including the frequency of such incidents.

Relational violence (exclusion) turned out to be the most common form of peer victimisation. In the year preceding the survey it was experienced by one fourth of the respondents (24%), with half of them (12% of the sample) reporting at least several such incidents. One in 10 respondents (10%) received an offensive text message or email from a schoolmate. The same proportion of the respondents said that a schoolmate had shared online unwanted information, images or videos about them. Physical violence was reported by 7% of the respondents, while 3% were sexually harassed by another student. One in 8 teenagers (12%) had their property stolen in the school, 4% reported they had been forced to buy cigarettes, beer, or other things for another student, and 2% were violently robbed, i.e., someone used or threatened to use force to take their property or money (Table 5).

No significant differences were found between the last two waves of the survey (in 2016 and 2018) in terms of the percentages of respondents reporting each form of victimisation.

”

I changed schools after my friends turned on me and started sending out screenshots of conversations which humiliated me. Although I am now at a different school, I still feel bad about what happened.

14-year-old boy

A quote from phone calls and emails to 116 111 Helpline for Children and Young People

Table 5. Categories of peer victimisation experienced by students of the senior year of secondary school in 2016 (N = 1,724) and 2018 (N = 1,609; %)

In the preceding year, have you personally had the experience of:	No, never		Once		Several times		Many times	
	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018	2016	2018
Being excluded or rejected by other students	79	76	11	12	8	9	3	3
Money or personal property being stolen from you	89	88	8	9	1	2	1	1
Receiving an offensive text message or email from a schoolmate	92	90	4	4	3	4	1	2
Unwanted information about you or your images/videos being shared online by a schoolmate	92	90	5	6	3	3	1	1
Being hit or beaten by any of your classmates or schoolmates	94	93	3	3	1	2	1	2
Being forced by a schoolmate to buy him or her cigarettes, beer or other things	96	96	1	2	1	1	2	1
Being sexually harassed by a schoolmate (e.g., someone trying to touch or undress you)	97	97	1	1	1	1	1	1
A schoolmate using or threatening to use force to take your money or personal property	98	98	1	1	1	0	0	0

Source: Own analysis based on: Bożewicz, 2019; Kalka, 2016.

The Ombudsman for Children in Poland has also looked into the topic of equal treatment in schools (Bulska et al., 2021). More than one third of eighth-graders participating in a survey felt they were treated worse than others, while one in eight students (12%) said they were treated better than others. 22% of the respondents reported that when they proposed something, their peers were more critical about their ideas than about other students' ideas. Fourteen percent of the participants said their proposals were more appreciated than other students' ideas. Respondents who reported their parents were highly involved in school life, were less likely to say their ideas were negatively assessed by their peers.

Gender- and sexuality-based violence

There are only few studies that have gathered systematic data on gender- and sexuality-based violence and discrimination. In Poland this subject has been explored by Chmurka-Rutkowska (2019) in a sample of students aged 13–15. More than half of the respondents observed or experienced the following forms of victimisation as

perpetrators, victims or witnesses: verbal abuse (76%), offensive comments by use of non-verbal sounds (63%), physical abuse with a comment or insult concerning gender or sexuality (62%), sexual gestures or innuendos (59%), comments about one's body (59%), taking one's clothes (55%), personal space violation (53%), peeping (53%), and simulating sex acts (51%; Table 6).

Female students were more likely than males to regularly observe or experience as perpetrators, victims or witnesses such behaviours as verbal abuse (60% vs 51%), personal space violation (39% vs 31%), offensive comments by use of non-verbal sounds (38% vs 31%), comments about body (35% vs 25%), and spreading harmful lies about their behaviour or intimate relationships with a boyfriend/girlfriend (17% vs 11%). Boys were more likely than girls to regularly observe or experience as perpetrators, victims or witnesses behaviours including taking off their clothes (17% vs 13%), persistent staring and following (17% vs 13%), taking personal items from their bags and showing them to others (16% vs 12%), taking and hiding their clothes (23% vs 6%), physical violence resulting from girlfriend-boyfriend

Table 6. Gender- and sexuality-based abusive behaviours that were observed by the respondents or experienced by them as perpetrators, victims, or witnesses (%)

	Girls		Boys		Total	
	often	occasionally	often	occasionally	often	occasionally
Using vulgar language referring to gender or sex, ridiculing, sexual stigmatisation, scornful or vulgar comments about the opposite sex or in reference to gender, insulting or obscene jokes about gender and sexuality	60	19	51	21	56	20
Personal space violation by unwanted touching, hugging, tickling, patting, pinching, pressing, rubbing, or blocking	39	19	31	16	35	18
Whistling, smacking lips, making kissing or "animal" sounds as comments about a person	38	29	31	26	35	28
Showing or sending sexual and/or obscene pictures, videos, drawings, and pornographic materials to persons who do not want that; watching pornography in other persons' presence without their consent	35	10	32	8	33	9
Making sexual gestures and innuendos	29	29	36	24	32	27
Hitting, pushing, or kicking with a comment or insult referring to gender or sexuality	30	35	34	25	32	30
Public (loud and blunt) expression of mocking or denigrating comments about one's body, movement, or private parts	35	28	25	29	30	29
Simulating (pretending) sex acts	23	27	27	25	25	26
"Accidental" touching of private parts, through clothing	15	27	17	18	16	23
Taking off someone's clothes, tugging, lifting up or pulling down a person's shirt or skirt, pulling bra straps or a blouse	13	30	17	18	15	25
Persistent staring, following	13	27	17	24	15	26
Abusive comments about someone's profile or picture, insulting social media posts about gender and sexuality	16	29	13	24	15	27
Spreading harmful lies about someone's behaviour or intimate relationships with a boyfriend/girlfriend	17	30	11	20	14	26
Taking someone's personal items, such as pictures, trifles, personal hygiene products, or underwear, from their bag or backpack and showing them to others	12	25	16	13	14	20
Taking and hiding a person's clothes, when they are in a locker room, dressing room, etc.	6	45	23	35	14	41
Hitting, nudging, pushing, physically attacking due to girlfriend-boyfriend conflicts (cheating, rejection, etc.)	9	23	13	18	11	21
Posting obscene, sexual comments and drawings about girls and boys on boards, walls, etc.	9	27	10	17	9	23
Taking one's unwanted photos and recording videos and sharing them online	8	28	11	25	9	27
Sending obscene or vulgar text messages, emails, letters, and social media messages	7	24	9	17	8	20
Peeping in a locker room, bathroom, dressing room, etc.	4	50	10	41	7	46
Exposing one's private parts in the presence of others and sexual harassment	5	23	8	19	6	21
Sexual harassment, forcing a person to sexual activity	2	12	8	10	5	11

Source: Chmura-Rutkowska, 2019.

conflicts (13% vs 9%), peeping (10% vs 4%), and sexual harassment and being forced to sexual acts (8% vs 2%).

According to the respondents, girls are more likely than boys to experience gender- and sexuality-based violence. Boys were twice as likely as girls to admit to being its perpetrators. Violence against girls was committed by both other girls and boys, while boys were mainly victimised by other boys.

A study into the situation of LGBTA persons in Poland, conducted by the Campaign Against Homophobia and the Lambda Warszawa Association (Mulak, 2021), found that one fourth (25%) of transgender persons remaining in the Polish education system experienced negative comments after disclosing their gender identity to their schoolmates or fellow university students. Moreover, in one third of those cases (30%), transgender persons' peers addressed them using inappropriate names or linguistic forms. School youth were more likely to be discriminated against than young adults, which may suggest – according to the authors of the report – that discrimination is more common in schools than at universities and other educational facilities.

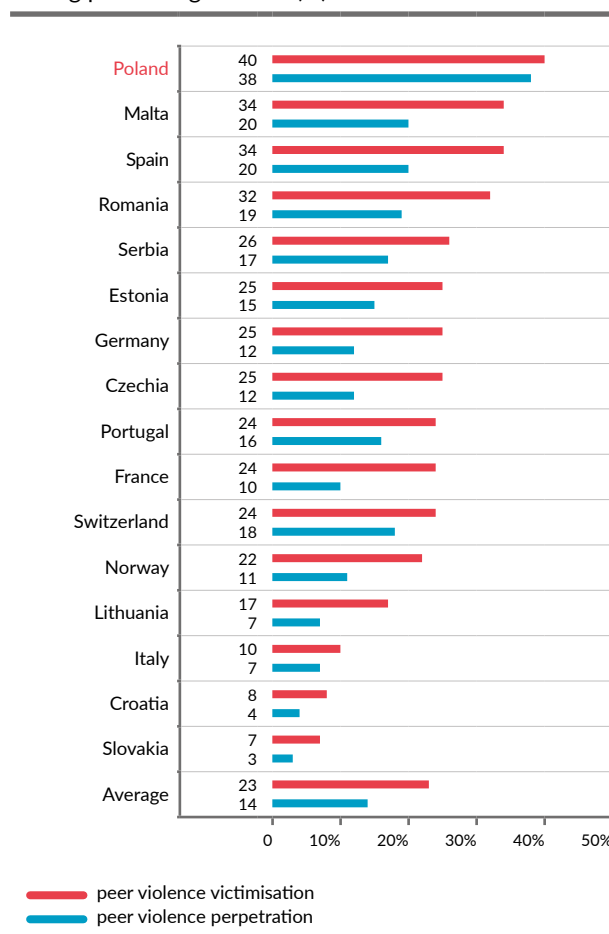
Peer victimisation in Poland as compared to other countries

EU Kids Online (Smahel et al., 2020) is an international study conducted in a broad age group (9–16), which addresses the problem of peer victimisation, enabling comparisons among European countries. Questions in the survey ask about topics including children and young people's experiences of peer victimisation, as victims or perpetrators.

In all participant countries the percentages of respondents who were victimised by their peers in the year preceding the survey were higher than the percentages of perpetrators. In Poland the difference was quite small, and the prevalence of peer victimisation was the highest among all 16 countries. Our country ranked first in terms of both victimisation (40%) and perpetration (38%) of peer violence. The country at the bottom of the ranking was Slovakia (7% and 3%, respectively; Figure 3). In most countries there were no gender differences between the perpetrators and victims of peer violence. In Poland, however,

boys were more likely than girls (41% and 33%, respectively) to victimise their peers. Furthermore, in Poland there was a marked increase with age, both in victimisation (9–11: 33%, 12–14: 44%, 15–16: 49%), and in perpetration (27%, 41%, and 53%, respectively).

Figure 3. Peer violence victimisation and perpetration among persons aged 9–16 (%)



Source: Smahel et al., 2020.

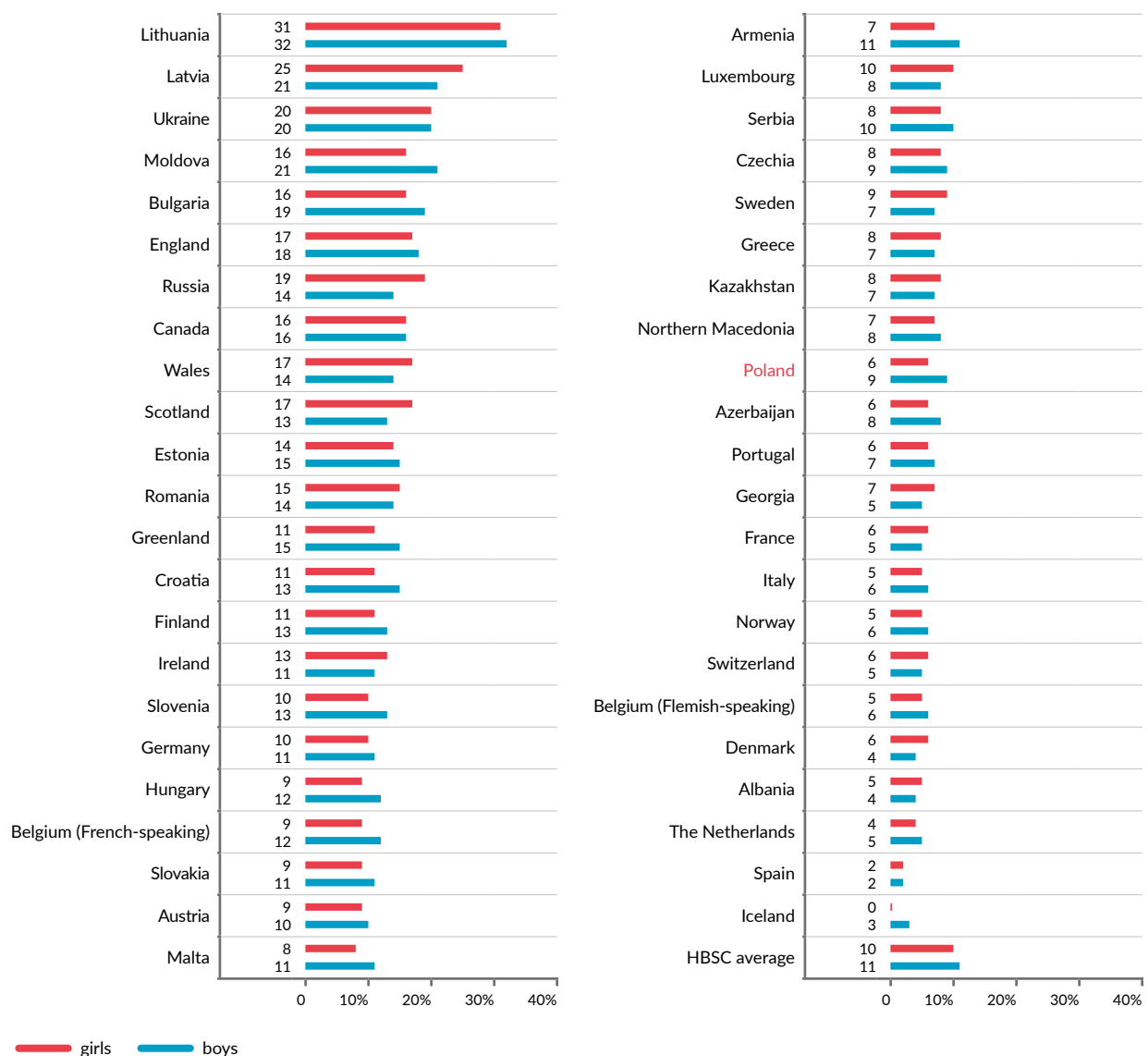
One study that is conducted on a large enough scale to enable international comparisons of health behaviour among school-aged youth is *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC; Inchley et al., 2020; Małkowska-Szutnik & Malinowska-Cieślik, 2018). It examines the problem of school bullying victimisation and perpetration among students aged 11–15.

The reports of 13-year-old respondents from all participant countries suggest that 10% of girls, and 11% of

boys, on average, experienced school bullying at least 2 or 3 times a month. It was perpetrated, with the same frequency, by 5% of girls and 8% of boys. Poland ranked slightly below the average in terms of bullying victimisation, and slightly above the average, when it comes to perpetration: 6% of the female respondents and 9% of males

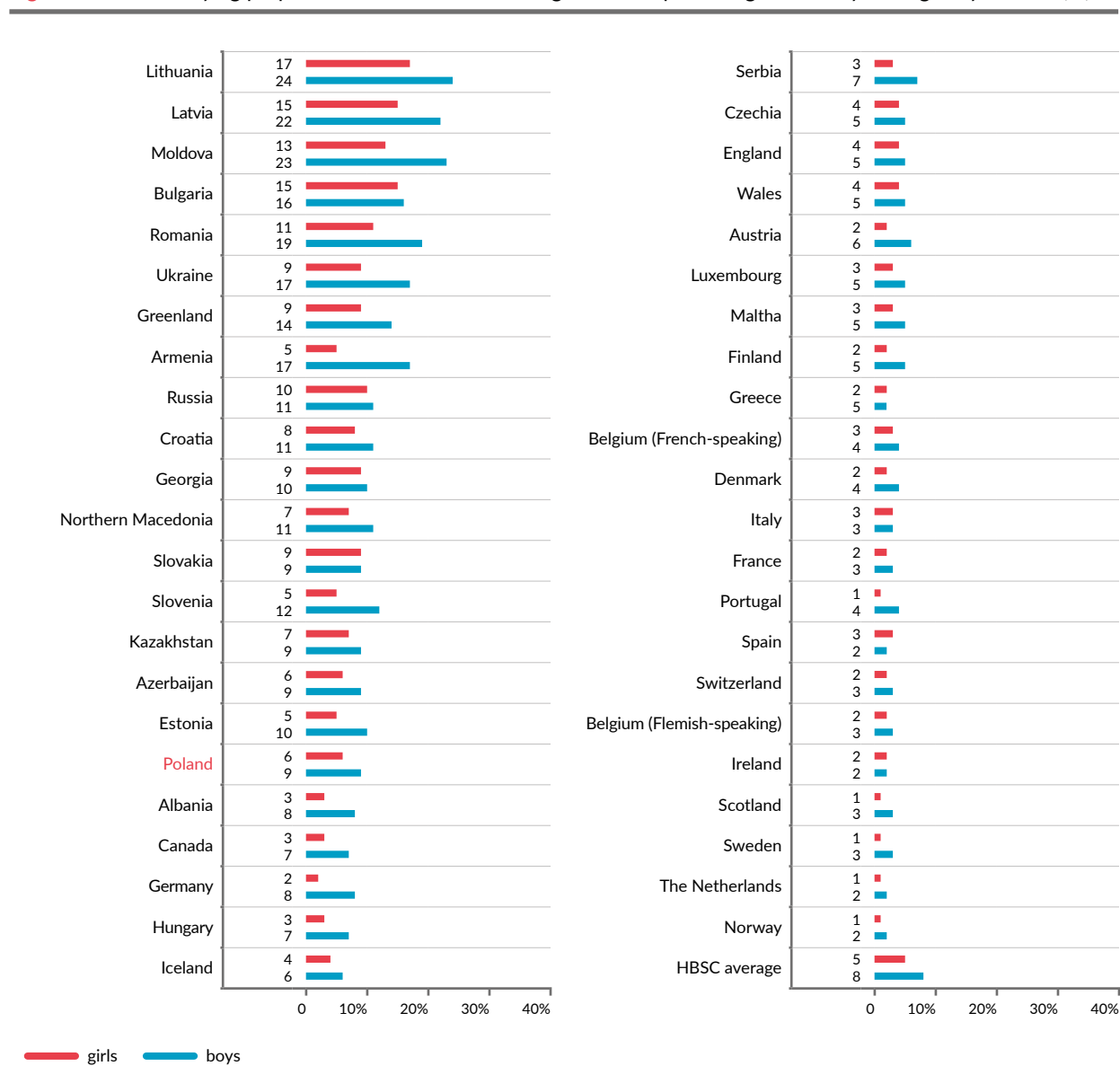
bullied others at least 2 or 3 times a month. The same percentages of students were bullied at school. Latvia and Lithuania were at the top of both rankings, whereas Spain and Iceland had the lowest levels of bullying victimisation, and the Netherlands and Norway – of bullying perpetration among 13-year-olds (Figures 4 & 5).

Figure 4. School bullying victimisation at least twice during 2 months preceding the survey among 13-year-olds (%)



Source: Inchley et al., 2020.

Figure 5. School bullying perpetration at least twice during 2 months preceding the survey among 13-year-olds (%)



Source: Inchley et al., 2020.

Among all the Polish respondents in the 11–15 age group, 23.5% were victimised at least once during 2 months preceding the survey, and 27.4% reported to have bullied their peers. Boys were more likely than girls to be both victims (27.6% vs 19.6%) and perpetrators (33.1% vs 21.8%) of bullying. In the sample surveyed,

bullying perpetration was the most likely to be reported by 13-year-olds (30.8%), whereas bullying victimisation was the highest among 11-year-olds (29.4%, Table 7). In most cases, such incidents occurred once or twice during the period covered in the study (Table 8).

Table 7. School bullying victimisation and perpetration among students aged 11–15 during 2 months preceding the survey (N = 5,225; %)

	Victimisation			Perpetration		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Total	23.5	27.6	19.6	27.4	33.1	21.8
11 y.o.	29.4	35.7	22.7	24.3	30.4	17.9
13 y.o.	23.5	26.5	20.7	30.8	36.6	25.4
15 y.o.	17.9	20.4	15.6	27.0	32.4	22.0

Source: Own analysis, based on: Małkowska-Szcutnik & Malinowska-Cieślak, 2019.

Table 8. Frequency of school bullying victimisation and perpetration among students aged 11–15, N=5,225, in %

	Victimisation	Perpetration
Once or twice	16.0	20.2
2–3 times a month	3.6	3.7
Once a month	1.7	1.5
A few Times a month	2.2	1.9

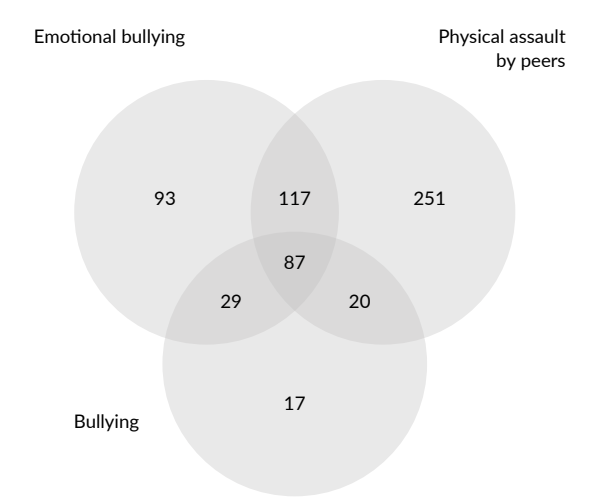
Source: Own analysis, based on: Małkowska-Szcutnik & Malinowska-Cieślak, 2019.

Co-occurrence of various forms of peer victimisation

Analyses suggest that various forms of peer victimisation tend to co-occur. Half of the respondents (51%) of the National Survey of Child Maltreatment (Włodarczyk & Wójcik, 2019), who were victimised by their peers, experienced more than one type of victimisation (27% experienced 2 types, 16% – 3 types, 7% – 4 types, and 1.4% – 5 types). Among those who experienced at least one of three categories of peer victimisation – physical assault, emotional bullying, and bullying – 19% were physically assaulted and emotionally bullied, and 14% experienced all three categories. The respondents who were bullied were also most likely to experience the other two forms of peer victimisation (Figure 6).

The *EU Kids Online* survey (Pyżalski, 2019) suggests that cyberbullying overlaps with traditional bullying (i.e., bullying without the use of technology). In most cases those who are victims or perpetrators of cyberbullying, are also involved in traditional bullying. Two thirds of

Figure 6. Co-occurrence of different categories of peer victimisation



Source: Włodarczyk & Wójcik, 2019.

the respondents (62.5%) who experienced traditional peer violence at least once a week, fell victim to cyberbullying with the same frequency. Similarly, the majority (68%) of those who perpetrated traditional peer violence at least once a week, were just as likely to use electronic violence.

Attitudes and opinions concerning bullying and discrimination in schools

A survey conducted in schools by the Empowering Children Foundation (Makaruk et al., 2019) asked representatives of parent boards and teaching staff about their knowledge concerning peer victimisation in their facilities. Parents were more likely than teachers to say that such behaviours

are present among students, but they were also more likely to admit they did not have enough information about the problem. Both groups considered emotional bullying as the most common category. More than half of both the parents (59%) and the teachers (53%) believed that insults and name calling were frequent or very frequent among students. The least common category of peer victimisation, according to the adult respondents, was physical assault. Half of the teachers (49%) and one third of the parents (33%) believed it occurred very rarely.

The previously mentioned study of equal treatment in schools (Bulska et al., 2021) found negative attitudes towards peer victimisation among school-aged youth. Girls and persons with more knowledge about the problem of unequal treatment were more negative about peer victimisation. Interestingly, attitudes toward the problem were not related to personal experiences of peer victimisation.

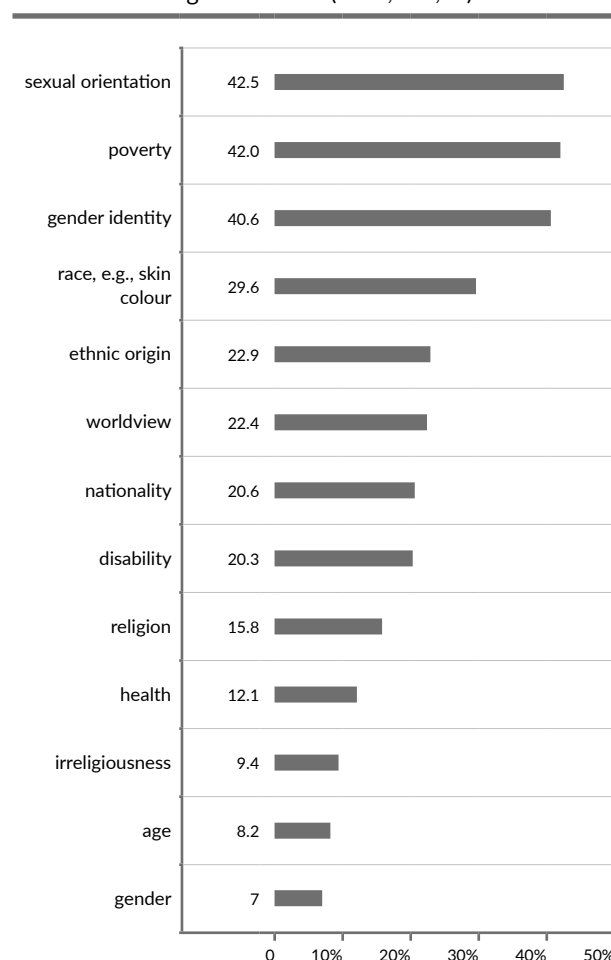
The respondents were also asked about their attitudes towards minority groups, which turned out to be positive. The majority of the participants said they would welcome young people from Ukraine, homosexual persons, students with disabilities, and Muslims as their classmates or schoolmates. While their attitudes were generally positive, homosexual persons were relatively less accepted than other minorities.

The analyses found a relationship between attitudes toward peer violence and attitudes toward minorities. Those opposing violence reported higher acceptance of members of the minority groups listed in the survey.

The vast majority of young people (over 80%) thought schools should provide anti-discrimination education. Similarly, the vast majority of teachers (89%) believed such education should be obligatory in schools, and three out of four agreed that it would prevent school violence. Teachers with more knowledge about equal treatment were more likely than others to support obligatory anti-discrimination education.

According to the teachers participating in the survey, the highest risk of discrimination in Polish schools is related to sexual orientation, poverty, and gender identity, followed by race, ethnic origin, worldview, nationality, and disability (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Social groups at risk^a of discrimination in Polish schools according to teachers (N = 1,037; %)



a the sum of frequently and very frequently answers.

Source: Bulska, 2021.

Consequences of peer victimisation

Peer victimisation has negative consequences not only for the victims, but also for its perpetrators and witnesses. These effects can be divided into three categories: health consequences in childhood, educational consequences in childhood, and consequences in adulthood (Armitage, 2021).

Research has found an association between repeated peer victimisation and mental health issues: anxiety and depression (Zwierzynska et al., 2013), feelings of loneliness (Nansel, 2001), low self-esteem (Pyżalski, 2012), and

suicidal ideation (Klomek, 2008). Furthermore, peer victimisation increases the risk of self-harming behaviour: self-injury and attempted suicide (Włodarczyk et al., 2018). Victims of bullying are more likely to have difficulty falling asleep and to suffer from dizziness (Hansson et al., 2020) and pains in the neck, shoulders, head, stomach or back (Garmy et al., 2019). The likelihood of increased psychosomatic symptoms grows with the frequency of incidents of violence (Due et al., 2005).

The experience of bullying may be linked to social exclusion, which may lead to withdrawal from social life and have a negative effect on the development of social skills (Due et al., 2005). Moreover, bullying victimisation has been associated with poorer functioning at school (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). Individuals who had more frequent experiences of peer victimisation felt less secure at school (Glew et al., 2008) and had a lower sense of belonging (Bulska et al., 2021).

The severity of psychological effects may depend on the relationship with the perpetrator. Although sibling victimisation is associated with serious emotional problems, such as low self-esteem, depression, and self-harm (Wolke et al., 2015), young people who were victimised by non-related peers demonstrated more severe mental health issues than those who were only abused by their siblings (Tucker et al., 2014).

The negative effects of peer victimisation may last into adulthood (Copeland et al., 2013; deLara, 2019; Vassallo et al., 2014). UK studies found that individuals who had experienced victimisation in childhood, almost four decades later still struggled with its negative social, health and economic effects (Takizawa et al., 2014).

Individuals involved in peer victimisation in a double role – both as victims and as perpetrators – were more

likely than others to show mental health issues and had lower academic achievement (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). US studies found that adults with a history of bullying perpetration were at increased risk for antisocial personality disorder (Copeland et al., 2013).

Even observing bullying, without being actively involved, may have negative consequences for mental health. Witnesses of violence are more likely to have suicidal ideation (Rivers i Noret, 2013).

Summary

Peer victimisation affects a substantial proportion of children and adolescents in Poland, and its serious consequences may last into adulthood. Inter-study differences in methodology and definitions, make it difficult to determine the prevalence of the problem, but findings from an international survey, EU Kids Online, suggest that Poland has the highest level of peer victimisation among the 16 participant European countries.

According to the School Violence and Bullying report published by UNESCO (2017), the development of an effective strategy to counteract peer victimisation requires reliable data on its prevalence, nature, and causes. Such data is also necessary to determine the cost of peer victimisation and evaluate the effectiveness of preventative measures. Special emphasis should be placed on improving the quality of data on peer victimisation by systematic monitoring of the problem and developing a consistent data collection methodology to be able to report cases and make international comparisons.

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