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### Kids aren't as harassed as they think

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New Jersey middle-school students believe a lot of bullying goes on at school.

In fact, they think it happens a lot more than it actually does.

The authors of a new survey argue that the sense bullying is pervasive leads to more of it because kids feel either empowered to continue their bad behavior or powerless to stop others from doing it.

"There's a 'reign of error' in which students misperceive what the norm is. That misperception drives a lot of behavior," said H. Wesley Perkins, a sociologist who co-authored the study with David Craig, a professor of chemistry. "If you've got three out of 10 kids who are bullies, but the other seven think they're the only ones who are not, they'll remain bystanders and go along with it."

Perkins presented the survey, "Assessing Bullying in New Jersey Secondary Schools," yesterday at the Social Norms Approach conference in San Francisco.

More than 10,000 kids in the fifth through ninth grades were asked whether they were involved in any bullying activities in the last 30 days and how often they thought bullying went on in their school.

"We found about 15 to 30 percent of the kids in middle school engaged in bullying behaviors, but 88 percent overestimated that," Perkins said.

According to the state Department of Education, which funded the study, a total of 1,409 incidents of harassment, intimidation or bullying were reported in schools from 2005 to 2006, an increase of 275 incidents reported in the period from 2004 to 2005.

The Social Norms Approach uses research to pinpoint what students are actually doing instead of what they think their peers are doing, said Perkins, who has done studies on high-school and college drinking, smoking and drug use. Those studies also found most students believed their peers were more heavily drinking, smoking, and using drugs than was actually the case, he said.

The findings should help school officials recast their anti-bullying messages, said Perkins, who with Craig teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, N.Y. They partnered with Rowan University Center for Addiction Studies to conduct the survey.

"The way to address the problem and to reduce it is to give the message the majority don't approve of it. If you're going to use peer pressure, you go with the true majority of peers who exhibit health and safe attitudes," he said, noting that bullying remains a problem in schools.

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