

# A descriptive analysis of bullying in prison: a study of male offenders in Estonia

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## Summary

Research on bullying has grown during the last three decades in different contexts – schools, children’s homes, dating relationships, the workplace, and prisons (Monks & Coyne, 2011); and research into prison bullying has developed rapidly during the last two decades (Ireland, 2005a, 2011) beginning with extensive research in England, but now enlarging into several different countries. At the beginning of the research history into bullying, matters were concentrated on measuring the nature and prevalence of bullying among both sex adolescents and adults offenders with prevalent research done among male adult offenders (Ireland, 2005a). However, at present, research has focused on the intrinsic characteristics, personal-descriptive (e.g., age, length of sentence, type of offence), behavioural prison based behaviours (e.g., negative behaviour towards staff and rules, positive and drug-related behaviour), and prisoners’ reactions to bullying.

This study sample explores bullying behaviour in one of Estonia’s maximum security prisons. It has two core aims. The first to explore the nature and extent of indirect, direct and coercive behaviours indicative of bullying perpetration and victimisation among sample males and, secondly to explore the differences between bully-category membership, with regard to prisoners’ personal and behavioural characteristics, and also with their reactions to the bullying.

The present study had the following research questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of indirect, direct and coercive bullying and victimisation among male offenders in Estonian maximum security prisons?
2. What are the differences between the bully-category (bullies, victims, bully/victims, not-involved) groups relating to their personal characteristics (age, sentence, length, offence type, total time spent in prison) behavioural characteristic (negative and positive behaviour, drug-related behaviour), and with their reactions to victimisation?

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Participants were adult men (N=110) who completed a self-reported questionnaire – the Direct and Indirect Prisoner Behaviour Checklist – Revised (DIPC-R©: Ireland, 2002a; author’s permission), which aims to measure direct, indirect and coercive forms of bullying. The DIPC-R specifically assesses physical, verbal, theft-related, sex-related, and psychological direct behaviours. The DIPC-R consists of 144 items, 56 representing victim items and 55 perpetration items. The remaining 33 items represent “filler” items and items measuring positive, negative and drug-related behaviour and reactions to victimisation. Participants were asked to indicate, in the past week, which behaviours they had carried out and which behaviours they had experienced. Translation, adaptation and validation of the DIPC-R were carried out during this research.

The findings of the present study showed that bullying is a widespread problem in Estonian male maximum security prisons. The first key question was not whether, but to what degree, bullying is a problem in one of the Estonian prisons. Using a self-reporting checklist that did not offer a definition of bullying to the participants, and listed a number of discrete behaviours defined as bullying behaviour, sampled adult male offenders reported that 57% had bullied others in the past week, with 63% admitting to being victimised.

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Ireland, 2005a), it was revealed that indirect bullying occurred more frequently than direct bullying, showing that indirect perpetration was significantly more common than direct perpetration (accordingly: 39% versus 24%) and indirect victimisation was significantly more common than direct victimisation (accordingly: 34% versus 19%) among male offenders.

Consistent with previous research was the finding that verbal aggression represented the most frequently reported form of bullying and victimisation in prison. However, the present study also revealed that physical aggression was equally prevalent among sampled offenders.

Previous studies show that the group that was found most frequently within prison settings was the ‘bully/victim’ group with bullies as the smallest category (e.g., Turner & Ireland, 2010). There was support for this tendency according to the previous research findings – more than 14% of male offenders were classified as bullies, 20% as pure victims, 43% as bully/victims and 23% as not involved.

In relation to personal descriptive characteristics, previous findings were equivocal with such characteristics either not relating to group membership at all, or where they do, the findings were inconsistent (Ireland, 2005a). These research results supported previous findings that bully/victims had

long term prison sentences (throughout a lifetime and current detention) compared with those who reported not involvement of bullying behaviour, but the increased amount of imprisonment was characteristic also for pure victims compared with other groups. In relation to age as a personal characteristic, bully/victims and pure victims tended to be younger versus pure victims and not involved offenders, who tended to be older. There were no differences in ethnicity and differences in offence type between the four bully-category groups.

Findings in relation to behavioural characteristics have supported previous studies (Ireland, 2011) revealing that bully/victims had incidents of negative behaviour, especially towards staff, compared with those not involved. There were no differences between bully-category groups concerning with involvement in prison-based drug-related behaviour.

Indeed the “response to victimisation” items indicated that bully/victims and pure victims were more likely to report defending themselves against another prisoner and be involved with other activities to stop bullying, whereby across all bully category membership there was a tendency to use avoidance responses. Self-harm had the lowest frequency response to victimisation and did not differentiate victim-bully status groups. This study found that bully/victims were more prone than pure bullies to report that they would respond to victimisation with aggression; and victims of bullying were more prone to report that they would respond to victimisation with emotional reactions.

Overall, the findings provide evidence of consistency with previous research regarding the nature and prevalence of prison bullying, revealing also personal and behavioural predictors of classification mainly into the bully/victim versus not-involved category. It highlights the need for longitudinal research specifically into exploring the relationships between the change of bully-category membership, and to plan and use effective interventions in the area of prison bullying.

*Keywords:* bullying, adult male offenders self-reported bullying behaviour, DIPC-R