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Web of Popularity, Achieved by Bullying

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For many teenagers navigating the social challenges of high school, the ultimate goal is to become part of the “popular” crowd.

But new research suggests that the road to high school popularity can be treacherous, and that students near the top of the social hierarchy are often both perpetrators and victims of aggressive behavior involving their peers.

The latest findings, being published this month in *The American Sociological Review*, offer a fascinating glimpse into the social stratification of teenagers. The new study, along with related research from the University of California, Davis, also challenges the stereotypes of both high school bully and victim.

Highly publicized cases of bullying typically involve chronic harassment of socially isolated students, but the latest studies suggest that various forms of teenage aggression and victimization occur throughout the social ranks as students jockey to improve their status.

The findings contradict the notion of the school bully as maladjusted or aggressive by nature. Instead, the authors argue that when it comes to mean behavior, the role of individual traits is “overstated,” and much of it comes down to concern about status.

“Most victimization is occurring in the middle to upper ranges of status,” said the study’s author, Robert Faris, an assistant professor of sociology at U.C. Davis. “What we think often is going on is that this is part of the way kids strive for status. Rather than going after the kids on the margins, they might be targeting kids who are rivals.”

Educators and parents are often unaware of the daily stress and aggression with which even socially well-adjusted students must cope.

“It may be somewhat invisible,” Dr. Faris said. “The literature on bullying has so focused on this one dynamic of repeated chronic antagonism of socially isolated kids that it ignores these other forms of aggression. It’s entirely possible that one act, one rumor spread on the Internet could be devastating.”

In a series of studies, some still awaiting publication, the U.C. Davis researchers asked 3,722 eighth to 10th graders in three counties in North Carolina to name their five best friends. Then the students were asked whether they had ever been a target of aggressive behavior by their peers — including physical violence, verbal abuse and harassment, rumors and gossip, or ostracism — and whether they had engaged

in such behavior themselves.

The researchers used the data to construct complex social maps of the schools, tracking groups of friends and identifying the students who were consistently at the hub of social life. "It's not simply the number of friends the kid has, it's who their friends are," Dr. Faris said. "The kids we're talking about are right in the middle of things."

Using the maps, the researchers tracked the students most often accused of aggressive behavior. They found that increases in social status were associated with subsequent increases in aggression. But notably, aggressive behavior peaked at the 98th percentile of popularity and then dropped.

"At the very top you start to see a reversal — the kids in the top 2 percent are less likely to be aggressive," Dr. Faris said. "The interpretation I favor is that they no longer need to be aggressive because they're at the top, and further aggression could be counterproductive, signaling insecurity with their social position.

"It's possible that they're incredibly friendly and everybody loves them and they were never mean, but I'm not so convinced by that, because there are so many kids right behind them in the hierarchy who are highly aggressive."

Over all, the research shows that about a third of students are involved in aggressive behavior. In another paper presented last year, Dr. Faris reported that most teenage aggression is directed at social rivals — "maybe one rung ahead of you or right beneath you," as he put it, "rather than the kid who is completely unprotected and isolated."

"It's not to say those kids don't get picked on, because they do," he said. "But the overall rate of aggression seems to increase as status goes up. What it suggests is that a student thinks they get more benefit to going after somebody who is a rival."

The research offers a road map for educators struggling to curb bullying and aggression both inside and outside of school. One option may be to enlist the support of students who aren't engaged in bullying — those at the very top of the social ladder, and the two-thirds who don't bully.

Richard Gallagher, director of the Parenting Institute at the New York University Child Study Center, said the research added to a growing body of scientific literature documenting the role that popularity plays in aggressive teasing and bullying behavior.

"It does highlight that it's a typical behavior that's used in establishing social networks and status," said Dr. Gallagher, an associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry. "Schools and parents need to be tuned into this as a behavior that occurs all the time. It means that school districts need to have policies that deal with this, and I think it means also that we need to turn to the adolescents for some of the solutions."

Dr. Gallagher said that although results had been mixed, some research showed that schools could reduce bullying and aggression by enlisting the help of students as well as administrators.

"It's not likely to eliminate it completely, but it's likely to decrease its occurrence," he said. "The programs

that have been successful are the ones that get kids to stop being passive bystanders who go along with teasing or bullying. Efforts have been made to get the popular kids to say, "This is not cool."

Dr. Faris said he planned to conduct new research that would match the social maps with yearbooks to better document a school's social hierarchy. A related study, he added, also suggests that it's not just popularity that influences aggressive behavior, but how much the student cares about being popular.

"Historically, all the attention has been on the mental health deficiencies of the bullies," he said. "We need to direct more attention to how aggression is interwoven into the social fabric of these schools."