



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Combatting bullying requires changes in attitude

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Rarely do we see such unanimity as in Thursday's 148-0 vote in the Massachusetts House for an anti-bullying bill. It is too bad, of course, that it seemed to have taken two tragic suicides by victims of bullying to have pushed this long-languishing piece of legislation forward.

The pending legislation—which undoubtedly will soon reach the Governor's desk for his approval—does contain some important features, such as training and reporting requirements. However, we should not see this as a panacea that will swiftly and surely eradicate a problem that has existed for generations of school children—perhaps as long as there have been schoolyards and students.

Regardless of the approach to prevention and enforcement, it remains extremely challenging to convince bullies that their actions are disadvantageous for themselves, besides being injurious to the targets of their abuse. All too often, bullies gain from their use of power over weaker classmates. Not only do they often acquire some tangible outcome, such as their victim's lunch or personal property, but they are typically admired for their strength and supremacy.

Based on responses from nearly 400 middle school students, Peter Thunfors and Dewey Cornell of the University of Virginia observed that bullies were, based on peer nominations, overwhelmingly considered to be the more popular students in class. The popularity of bullies was particularly pronounced among female students—the “Mean Girl” phenomenon.

Moreover, the problem of bullying and its solution goes well beyond the walls of little red schoolhouses. In our competitive culture, bullies frequently win. We worship athletes who taunt their opponents. In the workplace, managers are often rewarded for manipulating subordinates.

And many of our political leaders capture votes by bullying (“challenging”) their rivals with tough-sounding, “bring it on” rhetoric.

Efforts to combat school bullying will be feeble so long as we admire brutes and pity pushovers. Sure, schools need to change, but so does society in general.