



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

**The WBI Website
2011 Instant Poll-F
Workplace Bullying and Prior
Experiences with Abuse**

Gary Namie, PhD - Research Director

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Workplace Bullying and Prior Experiences with Abuse

WBI 2011-F Instant Poll

WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample comprised of currently and formerly bullied individuals). No demographic data are collected, but IP respondent samples are typically 80% or higher female. Our non-scientific Instant Polls accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted with the views of all adult Americans in our scientific national surveys.

May 2011 WBI Instant Poll, $n = 246$

To distinguish the workplace bullying phenomenon from its less bothersome and disruptive cousins – incivility and rudeness – bullying is often described in its most severe forms. In those extreme cases, there are many stress-related physical health consequences supplemented by emotional or psychological injury. Severe bullying is abusive conduct. The health harm from prolonged exposure helps differentiate bullying from incivility.

Abuse in the workplace is the only form of traumatizing interpersonal abuse that has yet to be considered taboo in the U.S. Child abuse, domestic violence and bullying of students in the schoolyard have all been deemed unacceptable to society and addressed by laws. Workplace bullying, psychological violence, and a form of abuse stands alone as acceptable in the eyes of U.S. law.

Workplace bullying most closely resembles the domestic violence phenomenon. The abuser is on the payroll.

At WBI we know that having a prior experience with abuse before suffering workplace abuse can account for the swiftness and severity of the emotional impact for the targeted person. It easily re-traumatizes a person based on having the earlier wound. Prior abuse victims also can recognize bullying for what it is capable of doing to a person. Whereas an individual with no prior abuse history could wonder for months exactly what is happening to him or her.

Despite the accelerative role for harm prior abuse represents to the bullied adult target, this does not mean that one's personal history signals a vulnerability to potential assailants. (Unless your bully is indeed a sociopath. Research shows that psychopaths have an innate ability to sense woundedness in others not perceived by properly socialized humans. The animalistic predators use it to hunt their prey.) In fact, if self-protection lessons were learned from prior abuse, the person may be able to thwart the (non-psychopathic) bully's initial attempts to dominate. Prior experience does not put a target on the person's back.

Remember, based on our prior online research, 98% of respondents in WBI surveys declare themselves targets of bullying at work.

The question asked: *“For bullied targets only: Please describe other experiences with abusive relationships you may have had.”*

Physical child abuse .170

Sexual child abuse .118

Prior domestic (spousal) violence .198

Current domestic (spousal) violence .021

Abuse from family or siblings .198 84/423

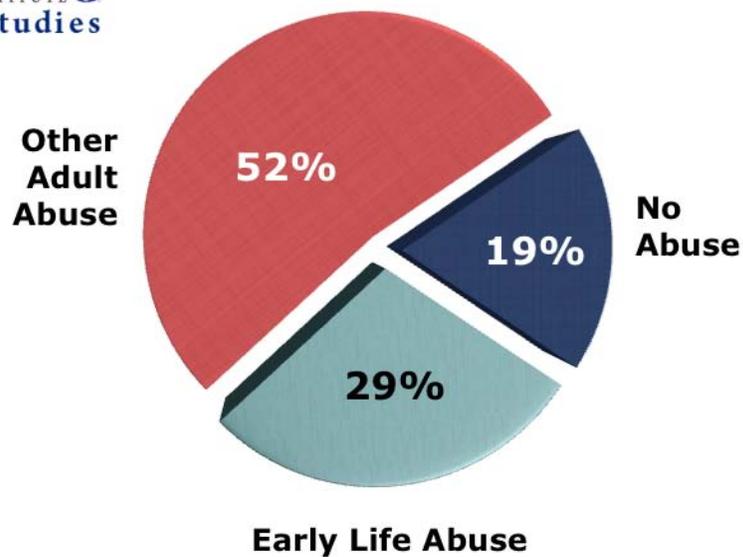
Sexual assault or rape .106

None .187

Experienced early life abuse .288

Other abuse as an adult .523

No abuse experience .187



Less than a third of bullied targets reported experiencing abuse as a child. Cycle of violence statistics suggest that about 30% of abused children grow up to be abusive adults. Perhaps early life abuse is a better predictor of who becomes bullies rather than who becomes targets.

The finding that half of bullied adult targets also experienced other forms of abuse, primarily domestic and familial violence, leads to speculation. Is bullying at work coincidental with partner violence? Or is the workplace abuse wearing down the defenses of the individual to the point that partners at home are able (and for some reason willing) to abuse them at home. The converse might also be true. Trouble at home wears the person down making her or him more susceptible to assaults at work.

The concurrence might also be explained by the target's interactive style. (This is much different than suggesting that a target actually believes she or he deserves to be humiliated and denigrated.) Perhaps the combination of a desire to seek the approval of others communicated by a high level of self-disclosure, a general openness toward others, the absence of guile, an inability to defend oneself when attacked, wanting to be "nice," and a cooperative approach to tasks is read by exploitative others who are attracted to people with those attributes as a "green light" to inflict harm.

From such a simple question without supplementary data about respondent circumstances, it is impossible to conclude why there is such a high co-occurrence of partner violence and workplace bullying. Causality cannot be determined.

Gary Namie, PhD
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