

Bullying in Central Illinois: A Mix of Rural and Urban

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Abstract

Bullying represents a significant public health crisis. An estimated one in five Illinois youth report experiencing a form of bullying in the past year (Garthe et al., 2021a). Experiencing bullying is associated with adverse individual and societal outcomes, illustrating the importance of bullying prevention. Previous research has shown rates of bullying in Illinois were highest in rural counties and counties that are primarily rural with a highly populated city (e.g., Champaign County, which is predominantly rural with Champaign-Urbana as an urban/suburban area). This needs assessment underscores the necessity of investigating bullying rates in specific regions to inform targeted violence prevention efforts. The current study examines rates of bullying across county types in Central Illinois (i.e., counties north of Clay County and south of Stark County), as Central Illinois has a mixture of rural counties and counties with a rural-urban mix. In particular, the current study explored county-level factors in relation to rates of bullying, including socioeconomic and household factors. In a longitudinal study looking at bullying and related factors worldwide, those with a lower socioeconomic status (SES) experienced higher levels of victimization (Hosozawa, et al., 2021). Secondary data analysis was conducted using bullying data from the Illinois Youth Survey and county-level data from the U.S. Census. Results have important implications for school districts and rural service providers in Central Illinois, especially when considering violence prevention programs and policies.

Keywords: bully, rural, violence, urban

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Introduction

Bullying represents a significant public health crisis. One in five Illinois youth annually report they have experienced a form of bullying (Garthe et al., 2021a). According to the American Psychological Association, bullying is an aggressive behavior with two key characteristics: 1, intentionality and 2, repetition (American Psychological Association, 2024). Thus, bullying is a pattern of aggressive behavior with malicious intentions. Bullying is a significant problem with violence prevention for Illinois youth. Previous studies have shown bullying is linked with adverse individual and societal outcomes (Rodkin et al., 2015). Aggressive behavior is a risk factor for poor adjustment and psychopathology over time (Rodkin et al., 2015). This creates a feedback loop as aggressive behavior encourages others to act aggressively and normalizes the practice as an effective social strategy (Rodkin et al., 2015). Thus, addressing the issue of bullying is very complicated due to the levels of violence and harm being passed on. Aggressive behavior is an umbrella term that bullying falls under. Bullying has specific characteristics such as repetitiveness and an asymmetric power relationship (Rodkin et al., 2015). This asymmetric power relationship is key in addressing bullying. In the present study, research will focus specifically on bullying.

Rates of bullying within Illinois were highest in rural counties (Garthe et al., 2021b) illustrating the fact that these counties are overlooked. When people think of violence in Illinois, they typically think of Chicago; violence is often seen as an urban problem. A study from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA) found residents are often unaware of the prevalence of crime in their community but base their perceptions from misconceptions about their neighborhood's violence compared with other neighborhoods (Reichert, J., & Konefal, K., 2017). This extends to urban areas as "There is a positive relationship between levels of fear of

crime and city size” (Reichert, J., & Konefal, K., 2017). (*Figure #1*) Schools in Central Illinois had high rates of bullying and had the lowest compliance to include full bullying policies in their district handbooks (Garthe et al., 2021c). These factors emphasize the importance of addressing bullying specifically in Central Illinois; this area of Illinois is often overlooked.

The present study looked at Central Illinois across county types, both rural and other urban/suburban as classified by the Illinois Youth Survey (IYS). Central Illinois is a unique area as it has many rural communities with some big cities: Champaign-Urbana, Peoria, Springfield, Bloomington-Normal, etc. Thus, it is important to look across county types when researching this area.

Methods

In the context of this study, Central Illinois was defined as counties north of Clay County and south of Stark County. (*Figure #2*) Rates of bullying at the county level were pulled from the 2018 IYS. “The IYS is a self-report survey administered in school settings and is designed to gather information about a variety of health and social indicators including substance use and perceptions, bullying, school climate, nutrition, and physical activity” (University of Illinois, 2022). Questions about bullying were time sensitive. One question asked if students had experienced bullying behavior within the past 12 months. Another question was how often they had been bullied, harassed, or made fun of in the past 12 months for appearance/disability and/or assumptions about religion, sexual orientation, or race/ethnicity.

We were curious how counties were labeled rural or other urban/suburban by the IYS, so we decided to find the biggest city in each county through Google. We then gathered the population and rank of that population compared to all cities in Illinois. Population data came from the United States Census Bureau published in 2022. Rates of SES and household factors at

the county level were pulled from Census data within the Kids County Data Center. These factors were compared with rates of bullying in each county and organized by county type. (*Figures #3 & #4*)

Descriptive statistics, which summarize a collection of information, examined rates of bullying for Central Illinois counties that were categorized by rural or other urban/suburban. These rates were compared to the state average of bullying at 29.5%. Correlation analyses examined the association between county-level socio-economic factors and rates of bullying.

Results

Both rural and other urban/suburban county types had higher rates of bullying than the state average of Illinois which is 29.5% from the IYS. *Figure #3 & #4*. County types were defined by the ICJIA County Reports (Garthe et al., 2021a). Note that some counties did not have enough schools to gather a bullying rate (*Figure #3 & #4*). Also noteworthy is that Cook County's bullying rate is 24.5%, below the state average. The average rate for other urban/suburban areas was 38.5% and rural was 39%. These percentages were pulled from the IYS.

Pearson's r correlation analyses were conducted on these results. The association between county poverty level and rates of bullying was $r = 0.18$. *Figure #5*. Associations between population rank and bullying within rural counties was $r = -0.35$. Other urban/suburban counties correlation was $r = 0.47$.

Discussion

Rates of bullying in Central Illinois are significantly higher than the state average. Our analysis speaks to correlation, not causation. There could be another factor involved in causing both. There are several confounding possibilities here. One factor could be school funding.

Schools with more funding may have more effective anti-bullying programs. Furthermore, higher rates of parent engagement in schools could lead to lower rates of bullying through better monitoring of children's behavior. For rural counties, the higher their biggest city ranks in terms of population ($r = -0.35$), the lower the percentage of bullying and vice versa. For other urban/suburban counties, the higher their biggest city ranks, the higher the percentage of bullying ($r = 0.47$).

This information has implications for educators in Central Illinois. These results highlight the importance of strengthening and having more bullying prevention programming in Central Illinois. These findings are consistent with other forms of violence, showing that rural and other urban/suburban counties tend to have high rates of violence. These county types must be included in violence prevention efforts. *Figure #6*.

There is a significant association between county poverty level and rates of bullying. Thus, school districts with higher levels of poverty may benefit from more bullying prevention efforts. The results of city rank and bullying correlation analysis show that counties with mid-size urban areas were at the greatest risk for bullying ($r = 0.47$). This correlation warrants further examination. More violence prevention and bullying prevention efforts are needed within school districts in Central Illinois, across rural and other urban/suburban counties.

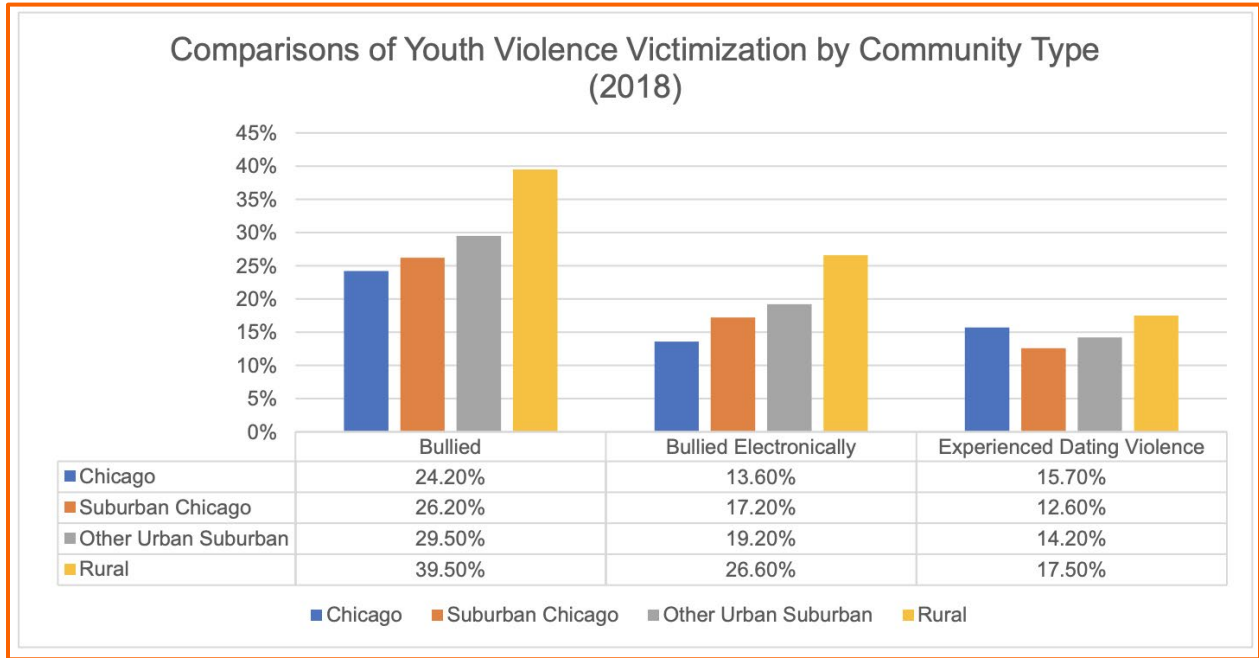
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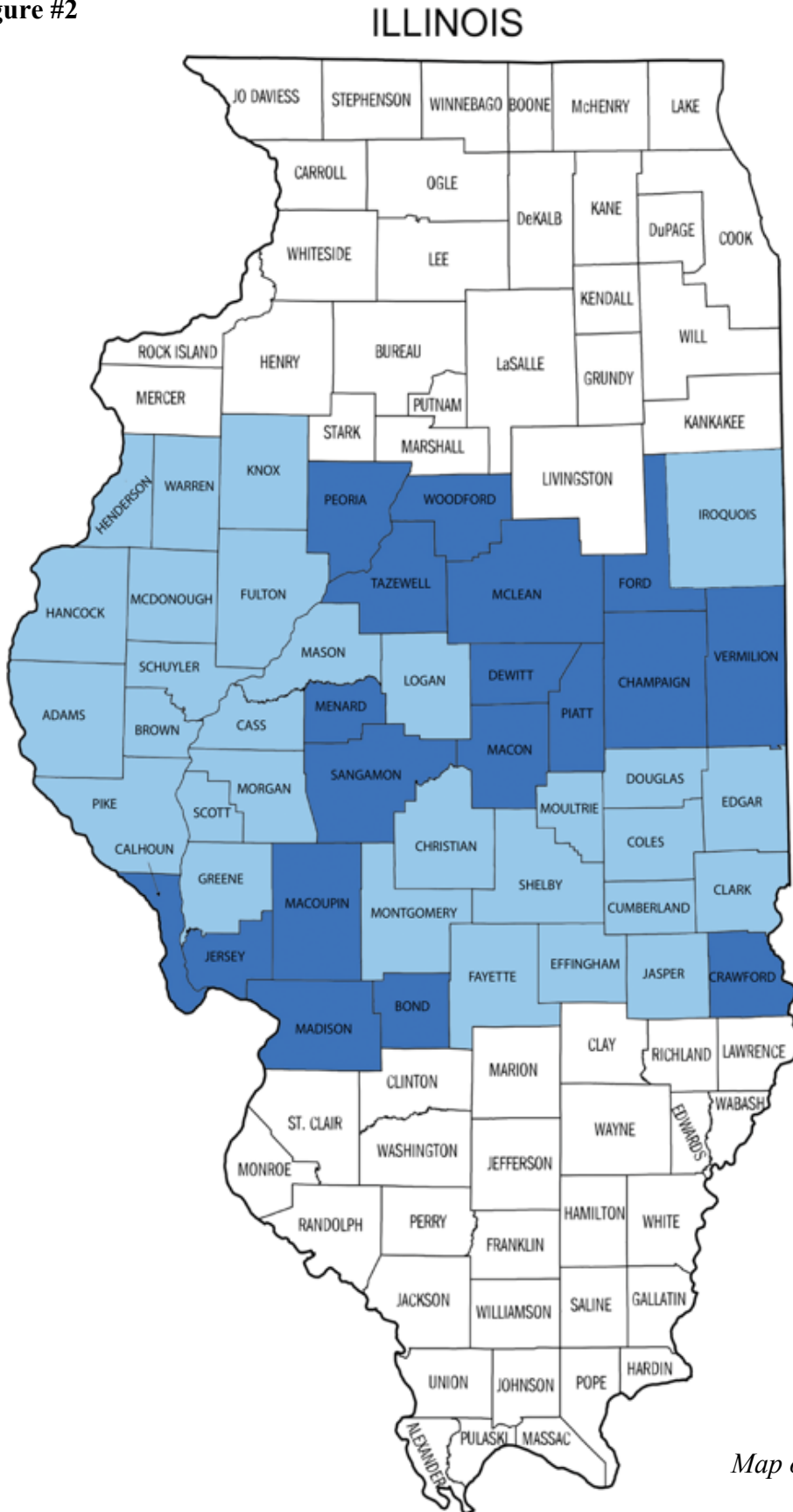
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Figure #1



Comparisons of Youth Violence Victimization by Community Type

Figure #2



Map of Central Illinois

Figure #3

County (Urban/Suburban)	Bullying Rate
Bond	-
Calhoun	-
Champaign	40%
Crawford	40%
De Witt	41.7%
Ford	44.8%
Jersey	-
Macon	-
Macoupin	40.7%
Madison	37.7%
McLean	28%
Menard	47.1%
Peoria	33.3%

Piatt	33.9%
Sangamon	38.9%
Tazewell	37.4%
Vermilion	34.4%
Woodford	28.1%
AVERAGE	38.5%
(State Average)	29.5%

Urban/Suburban Counties in Central Illinois - Bullying Rate Pulled from IYS

Figure #4

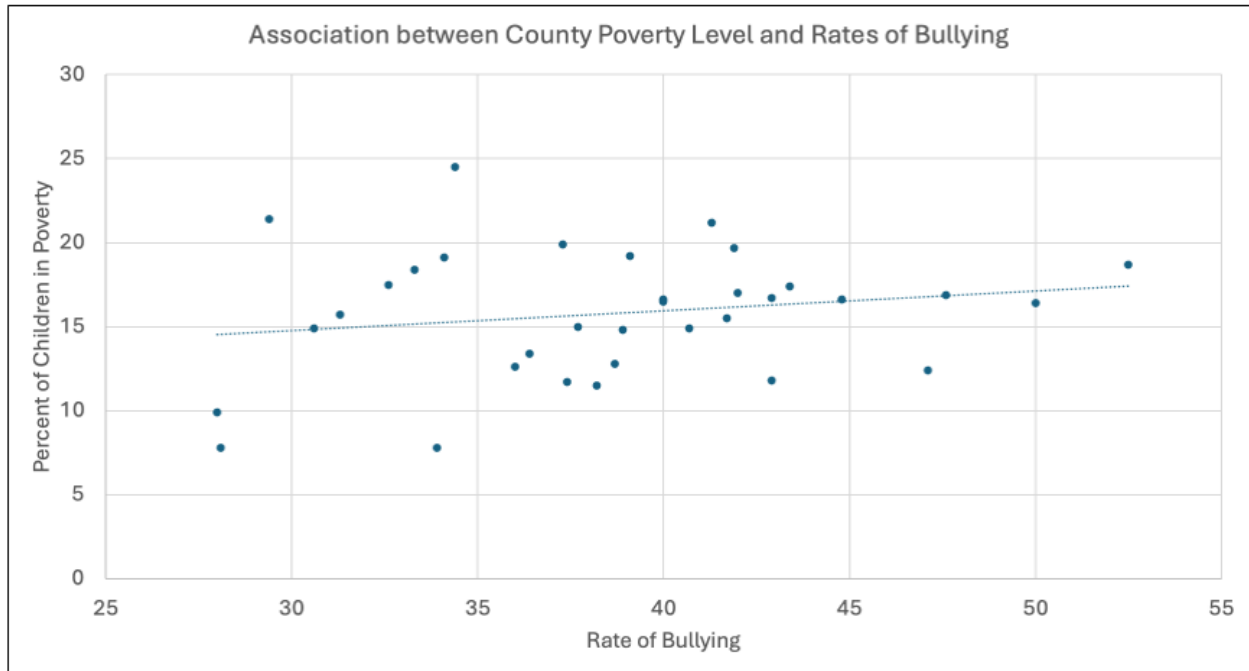
County (Rural)	Bullying Rate
Adams	43.4%
Brown	-
Cass	31.3%
Christian	-
Clark	30.6%

Coles	34.1%
Cumberland	36%
Douglas	38.2%
Edgar	37.3%
Effingham	42.9%
Fayette	-
Fulton	50%
Greene	32.6%
Hancock	-
Henderson	-
Iroquois	42.9%
Jasper	-
Knox	41.9%
Logan	42%
Mason	39.1%

McDonough	29.4%
Montgomery	52.5%
Morgan	47.6%
Moultrie	38.7%
Pike	-
Schuyler	-
Scott	-
Shelby	36.4%
Warren	41.3%
AVERAGE	39%
(State Average)	29.5%

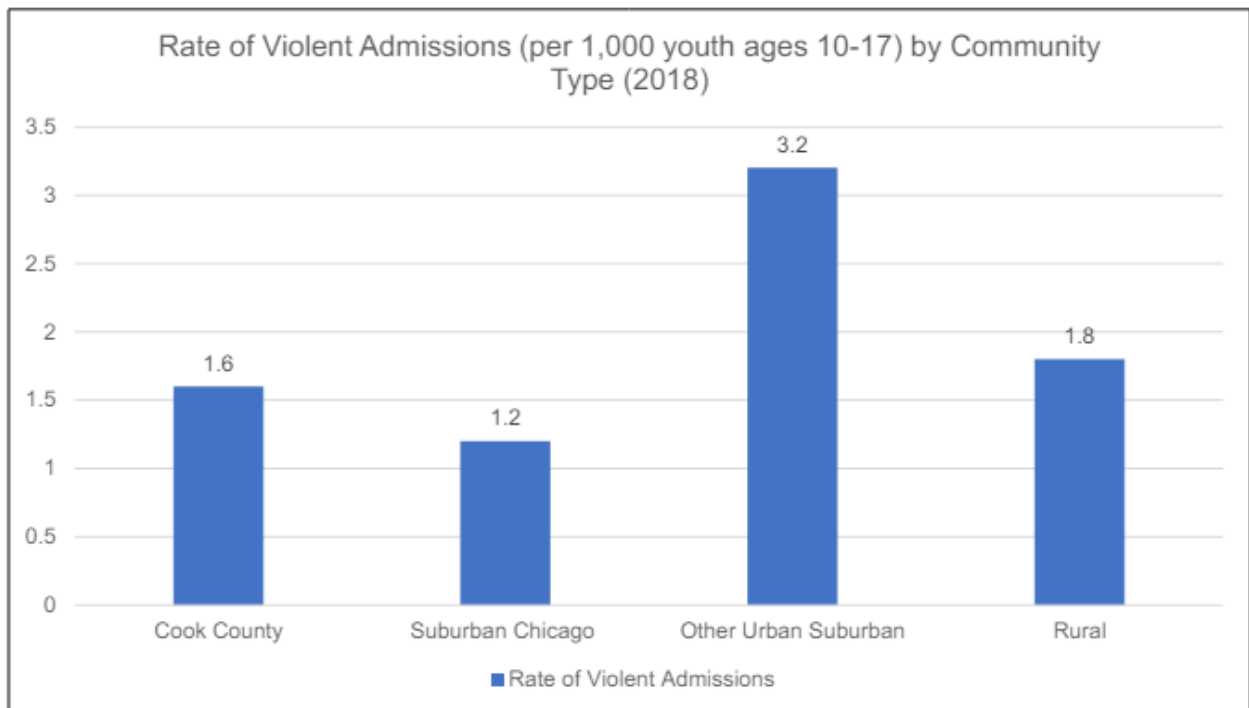
Rural Counties in Central Illinois - Bullying Rate Pulled from IYS

Figure #5



Association Between County Poverty Level and Rates of Bullying

Figure #6



Rate of Violent Admissions by Community Type - Community Reports from ICJIA