

# Introduction to the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS)

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“By its very nature covert bullying behaviour among young people does not provide easy policy and practice options.”

## 1.1 Context

The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is committed to working with State and Territory Government and non-Government education authorities to ensure all school students can learn in an environment which is free from all forms of bullying, harassment, violence, abuse and neglect.

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) was commissioned by DEEWR to address the lack of current, reliable evidence about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in the Australian cultural context, and to provide a foundation for informed action. This comprehensive study, conducted by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC), at Edith Cowan University, aimed to improve the knowledge and understanding of the key determinants, temporal development, predictors, prevalence and outcomes of covert bullying, to ultimately determine effective policy and practice to address this problem. The Study was designed to provide information, at a representative national level, about what constitutes covert bullying, the forms it takes, by whom it is practiced, towards whom it is directed, how frequently it is experienced, and the impact it has on those who are bullied. It also aimed to include reference to emerging forms of cyber bullying (such as internet and mobile phone-based bullying), as well as other forms of covert bullying including relational bullying.



## 1.2 Background to the research

Covert bullying is a less direct form of ‘hidden’ bullying, that arguably is becoming more prevalent and insidious among students both as a result of the incomplete implementation of school bullying prevention policies, and the advent of newer Information and Communications Technology (ICT). It is widely accepted that bullying involves the ‘systematic abuse of power’ through unjustified and repeated acts of aggressive behaviour intended to inflict harm<sup>[1]</sup>. Only recently, however, has there been recognition that bullying is more than merely a physical or verbal conflict between two personalities, but rather involves a complex social interaction between peer groups<sup>[2; 3]</sup>.

Covert bullying may take a number of forms such as spreading gossip, hurtful stories or rumours; deliberately excluding or enforcing social isolation; and even cyber bullying. While the general concepts and theories underlying covert bullying including definitions of indirect, relational, and social aggression are not new<sup>[4-6]</sup>, research into how to address covert bullying is still in its infancy. This is due, in part, to the fact that in the past covert bullying has been erroneously perceived as an unpleasant but generally less harmful form of childhood behaviour<sup>[7; 8]</sup>. Considerable research indicates that covert bullying has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health problems than overt bullying<sup>[9-15]</sup>. Those problems are not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, but also have the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale<sup>[16-18]</sup>. Both boys and girls rate covert bullying as worse than physical bullying, causing considerable distress and psychological harm<sup>[9-12; 14]</sup>. The recent digital media revolution has provided young people with an extra platform and communication culture upon which covert bullying can operate<sup>[19-21]</sup>. While initial research emerging from this study indicates that ‘traditional’ forms of covert bullying, including threatening behaviour, spreading nasty rumours, ignoring, and teasing are still some of the most prevalent forms of covert bullying in Australian schools, the use of technology to also deliver these forms of bullying behaviour is likely to rise significantly in future years.

Covert bullying and its effects are further compounded in schools where teachers fail to recognise and/or respond effectively to these incidents. While schools often have clear policies and actions to address overt bullying such as physical or verbal bullying, teacher discomfort with the ambiguity of covert bullying may be a factor in their lack of intervention when it does occur. Schools more often have clear policies and responses with regard to physical and verbal bullying. Covert bullying is, however, by its very nature difficult to detect and therefore less likely to be outlined clearly in school policy guidelines. Recent findings suggest teachers consider covert bullying to be less serious than other forms of bullying and are therefore less likely to intervene<sup>[7; 22]</sup>. Similarly, the majority of students report they didn’t tell teachers about bullying because they perceive it won’t make any difference, or in a third to a quarter of cases, students report that their telling made matters worse<sup>[23-25]</sup>.

Consequently, there exists a clear need for a comprehensive understanding of the nature, risk and protective factors associated with covert bullying behaviour to guide evidence-informed practice and policy.



## 1.3 The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study

There is international recognition of Australian bullying prevention research and the National Safe Schools Framework, aimed at building safe and supportive whole of school environments to prevent bullying, harassment, violence and child abuse. More recently, awareness has grown within Australia of an increasingly insidious, non-confrontational covert form of bullying.

To-date, information about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in schools is limited and not representative of Australian children, providing a poor evidence base to ascertain the extent of covert bullying and, consequently, a poor foundation for informed national action. The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) aimed to redress the lack of recent and reliable evidence about the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in the Australian context, and to identify possible policy and practice options for schools that are practicable, relevant, and acceptable to Australian education systems, sectors and schools. This report aims to shed new light on covert bullying among school-age children, with the ultimate goal of identifying feasible, effective and sustainable policy and practice to address this phenomenon.

The ACBPS report presents a triangulation of covert bullying behaviour data collected using mixed methods from Australian students aged 8 to 14 years. The following data were utilised:

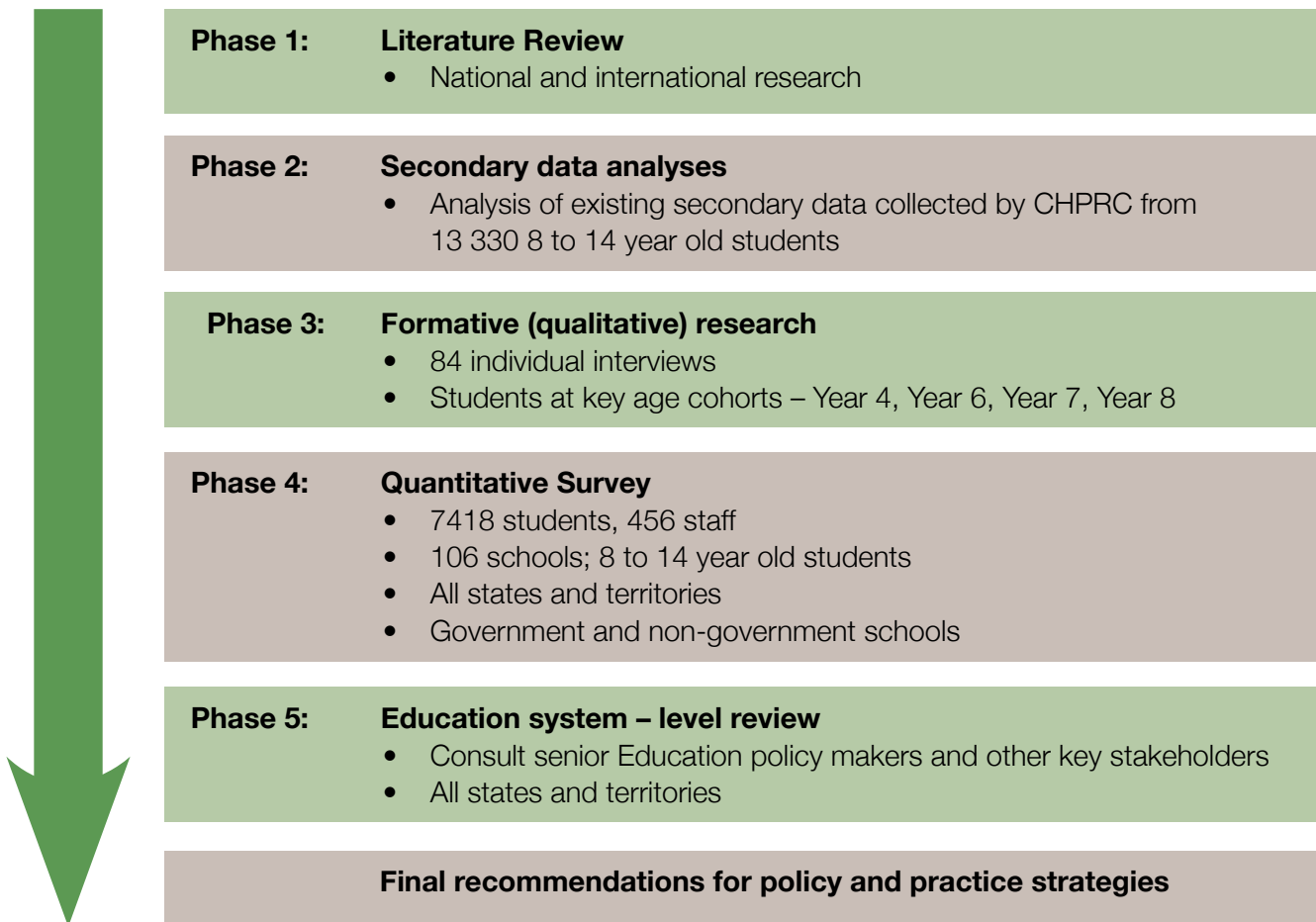
1. Published theoretical and empirical evidence;
2. Qualitative data collected (2007) from 84 students aged 8 to 13 years;
3. Quantitative CHPRC data (from existing data sources 2002-2006) from 13 330 students aged 8 to 14 years; and
4. Cross-sectional quantitative national data collected (2007) from 7 418 students aged 8 to 14 years and 456 school staff.

Consultation took place with international and Australian bullying prevention researchers and other experts in education and health promotion. This consultation helped to determine pertinent issues to guide this study and identified research gaps, especially in the area of cyber bullying, to better inform the design of our formative research phases. Information from researchers also helped to define covert bullying for this study, identified key published research for the literature review, and provided advice and items for the qualitative interview and quantitative survey instruments. Several researchers also assessed the content validity of items used for the national survey.

For the purpose of the ACBPS overall, covert bullying has been broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is ‘hidden’, out of sight of, or unacknowledged by adults. Covert bullying includes behaviours linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression as long as the behaviour remains either unwitnessed, or unaddressed, by an adult. Across the ACBPS sub-studies, covert bullying has been defined slightly differently, but generally has been considered as encompassing repeated acts of bullying in ways that can’t be easily seen by others, including by means of technology.

The iterative and multifaceted research design of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study is depicted below (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study Design**





## 1.4 Research objectives

The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study aimed to:

- a) Improve our understanding of the nature and extent of covert bullying among students aged 8-14 years, and to assess the social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural impact it has on young people involved in this behaviour:
  - the prevalence and insidiousness of covert bullying in metropolitan and rural Australia;
  - at what age it begins, what form(s) it takes, when it usually occurs, with what other forms of bullying it is associated, who it involves, young people's perceptions of its causes and the extent to which multiple contexts are used (what are the primary mediums through which covert bullying manifests, and is there a progression among the different mediums);
  - who is bullied, how do they feel, and how does it affect them (emotionally, socially, physically, behaviourally);
  - forms of covert bullying and their prevalence among girls and boys, and age-related patterns; and
  - how frequently young people witness covert bullying, how they feel about it, what is their response, and how do they think the person being bullied feels.
- b) Increase our knowledge and understanding of the degree to which young people themselves have participated, or been offenders in, covert bullying, as well as the reasons for their involvement:
  - when, how often and why have they been involved;
  - how they rationalise their behaviour, what do they gain from it and how do they feel about it; and
  - when does it happen, who do they talk to about it, what were the outcomes of telling.
- c) Determine what children and adolescents believe would be the best form(s) of support for preventing and reducing the impact of covert bullying, to what extent they believe parents, teachers, and other adults can intervene effectively, and what their main fears are regarding talking to adults.
- d) Assess understanding by school staff of covert bullying and the most effective means of dealing with it.
- e) Review national and international published empirical and theoretical literature addressing covert bullying to identify effective strategies which could be used by parents/schools.



## 1.5 ACBPS report structure

This report is divided into six chapters that address the methods and findings of each of the phases of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study shown in Figure 1.1.


Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS) including the identification of key issues related to the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Australian schools.

Chapter 2 provides a systematic and comprehensive literature review that addresses the concepts underlying covert bullying, analysed within historical, social, developmental and contextual frameworks. In addition to reviewing individual, school, family and community-based factors associated with covert bullying, the review assesses the potential impact of the growth in electronic information and communication technologies in terms of cyber bullying, and the effect this may have on the nature of covert bullying in the future. Finally, the review examines potential or promising interventions to prevent or reduce covert bullying, particularly whole school approaches that have historically targeted overt physical and verbal bullying, incorporating new approaches to assist school personnel, teachers, parents and peers to effectively address covert bullying.

Chapter 3 of the report outlines the findings of a series of linked data analyses obtained from secondary data sources which utilised four large longitudinal data sets that included covert bullying variables, from research conducted by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre from 2002 to 2006. These data were collected from 13 330 students in Years 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9. The oldest CHPRC data set used for this retrospective review was collected from Year 4 students in 2002 as part of the Friendly Schools Friendly Families (FSFF) bullying prevention project. Data obtained from upper primary and secondary school students were used from:

- the Supportive Schools Project (SSP), a secondary school bullying prevention project;
- the Marijuana Education Project (MEP), a study which investigated the clustering of marijuana use and other problem behaviours (including bullying) among secondary school aged students; and
- the Extra-Curricular (EC) project, which investigated factors that predict student connectedness or otherwise to school, of which experiences with bullying behaviours was hypothesised as a factor.

Findings from this analysis of secondary data were used to contextualise the 2007 ACBPS quantitative national survey data presented in Chapter 5 and to provide a historical perspective of the prevalence and major predictors of covert bullying behaviour among Years 4 to 9 students from 2002 to 2006.



Chapter 4 describes the major findings from the ACBPS qualitative research phase. This phase aimed to provide greater depth in understanding of the nature, motivations for and extent of covert bullying, from 8 to 13 year old students who are involved in these behaviours, and subsequently to use these data to improve the relevance, reading level and content validity of the 2007 quantitative national survey items. This formative information was especially needed in the area of cyber bullying where few previously validated and reliable items have been developed to measure this behaviour. This study phase comprised two parts; an initial brief quantitative screening assessment to identify the qualitative sample, followed by 84 individual interviews with Years 4, 6, 7 and 8 students who reported in a preliminary selection or screening instrument they were covertly bullied and /or covertly bullied others.


Chapter 5 reports the research methods and results of a quantitative national survey among a large number of students and school staff conducted from October to December 2007. This phase of the ACBPS study used a cross-sectional design to assess the nature and prevalence of covert bullying in Government and non-Government schools in metropolitan and country areas. This nationally representative survey was completed by 7418 Years 4 to 9 students and 456 school staff from 106 schools across Australia in November 2007.

The final chapter of the report, Chapter 6, describes the ACBPS recommendations and the review process undertaken by representative stakeholders. The review involved consultation with senior education policy makers and other stakeholders across all States and Territories. This feedback was used to refine recommendations about policy and practice for national and State education systems and sectors, and primary and secondary schools. The recommendations are contextualised using existing Australian research on bullying in schools considered generally, and Australian and international research on covert bullying. In particular, the conclusions and recommendations drawn from this research provide some practical indications and strategies to address covert bullying, acknowledging where possible the existing parameters of school education policy, legislation and practice.



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