What counts as bullying? The perspectives of 13-year-olds

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Background to the study

- There is ongoing debate on how best to define bullying (Hellstrom et al., 2021); the prevalence of bullying found depends on the definition and question wording (Huang and Cornell, 2016)

- Some evidence of a discrepancy between the views of young people and 'official' labelling of bullying by principals, teachers or researchers (Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Byrne et al., 2016)

  - Focus on negative behaviour, even one-off, rather than repetition, intention and power imbalance (O'Brien, 2019; Campbell and Xu, 2022)
  - Bullying as 'mean' and negatively affecting feelings
  - Continuum from 'playful' to harmful teasing (Dawes and Andrews, 2025)

- This paper uses GUI Cohort '08 data on 3,033 13-year-olds to explore the circumstances under which young people label behaviours as bullying

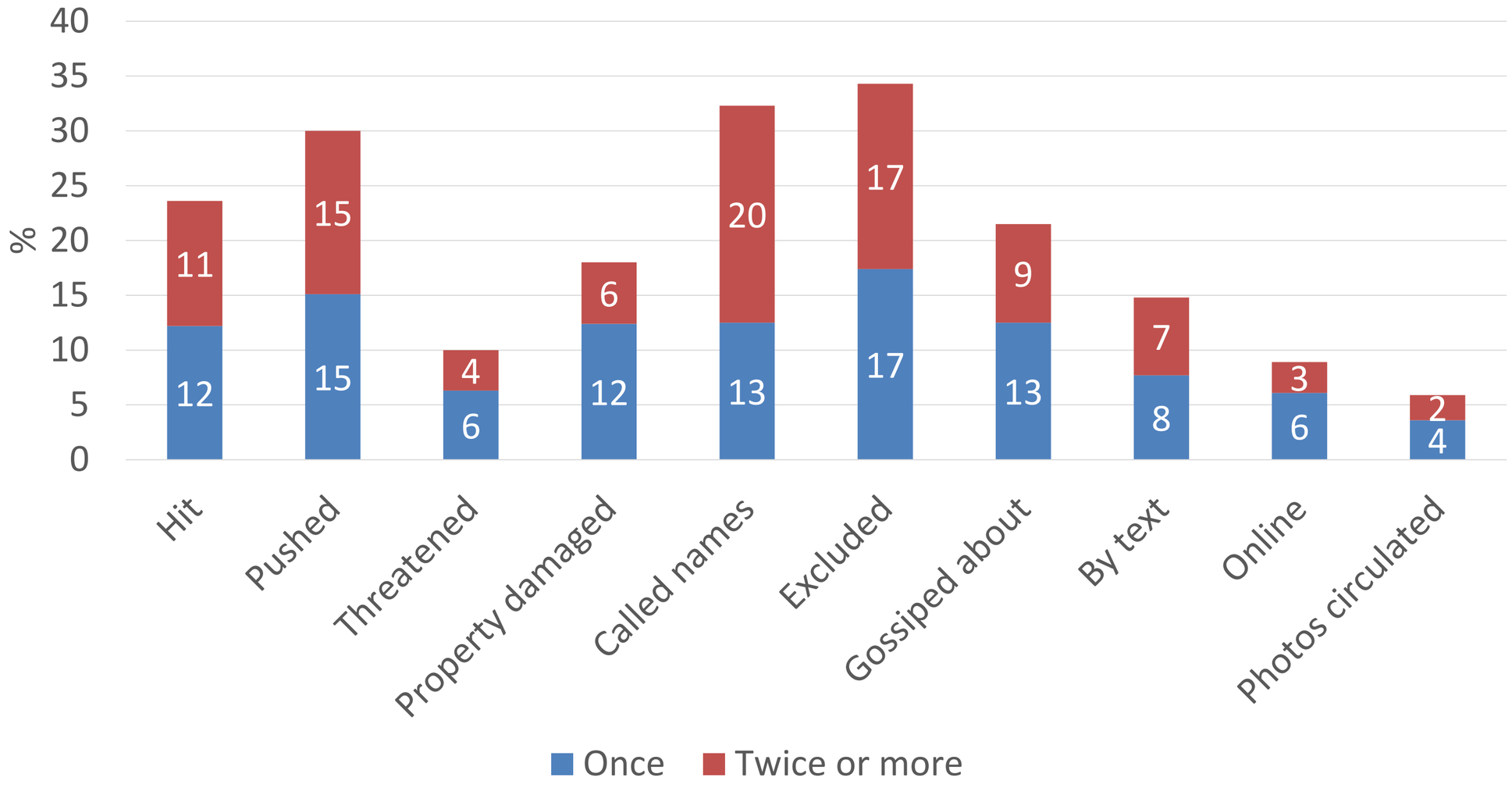
Being bullied at age 13

Two different measures:

- Have you been bullied in the last 3 months? **8%**
- Have you experienced any of the following from a child or young person in the last 3 months? **62% on at least one occasion, 37% behaviour repeatedly (2 or more times)**

  - Been hit, kicked or punched;
  - Been pushed, shoved or slapped;
  - Name-calling, hurtful slagging;
  - Been sent hurtful message by text, email or other message app;
  - Had something hurtful posted online about you;
  - Someone circulating upsetting note/ photo/ video or graffiti about you;
  - Someone taking/ damaging your personal possessions;
  - Exclusion (being left out);
  - Gossip, spreading rumours about you;
  - Threatened/ forced to do things you don't want to.

Different types of bullying behaviours at age 13



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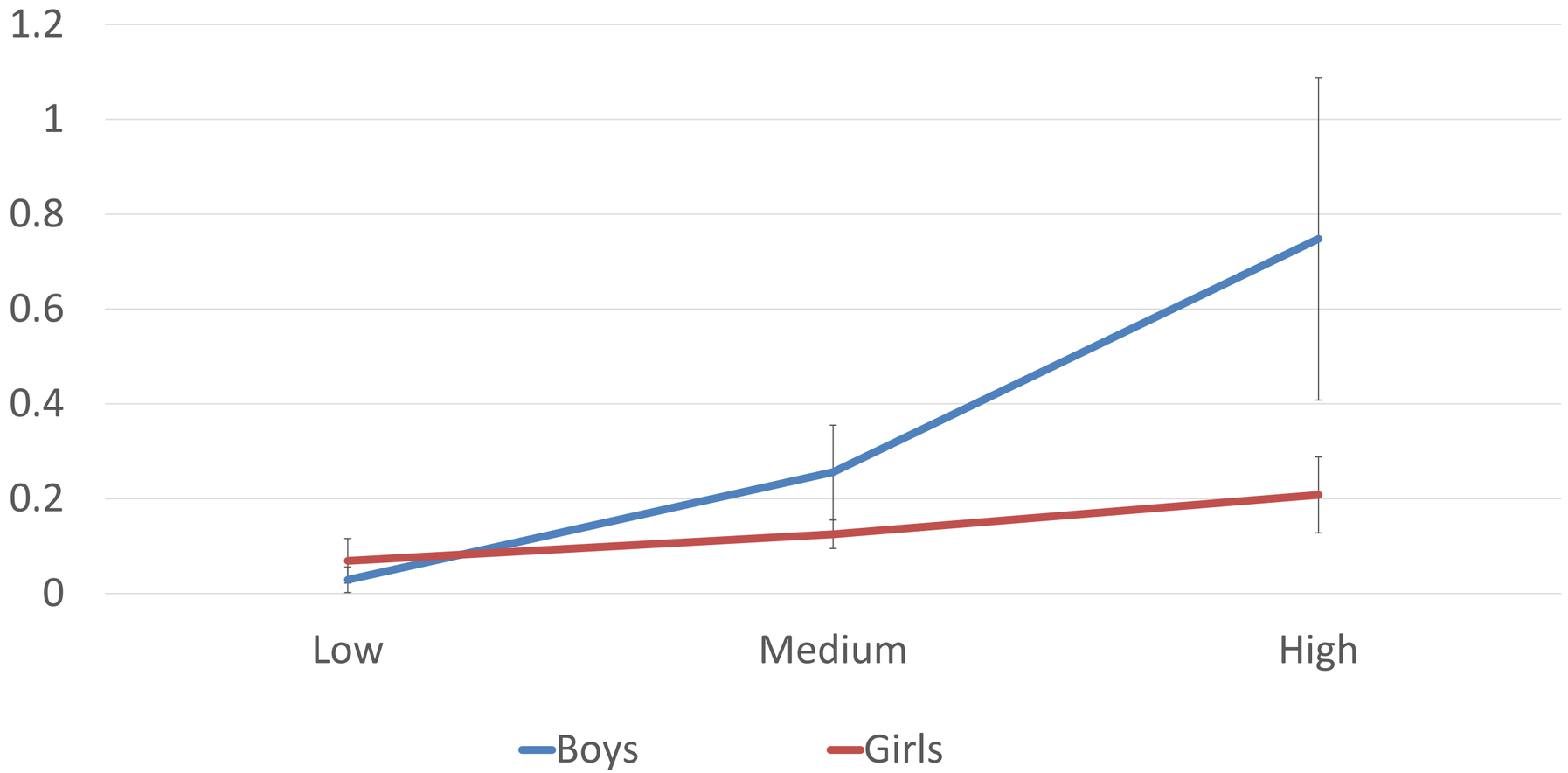
What is considered bullying by young people?

- Discrepancy between being ‘bullied’ and experiencing bullying behaviours
- Repeated behaviour
- Same person or people (12 percentage point difference)
- Behaviour seen as causing harm (upset, afraid, angry) – being made angry has strongest effect (10 percentage point difference)
- Strongest: circulating an upsetting photo, name calling and having something hurtful posted online (13-14 p.p.)
- Least (not significant): pushed, threatened or excluded

Labelling a behaviour as bullying by level of harm and gender (predicted probabilities)



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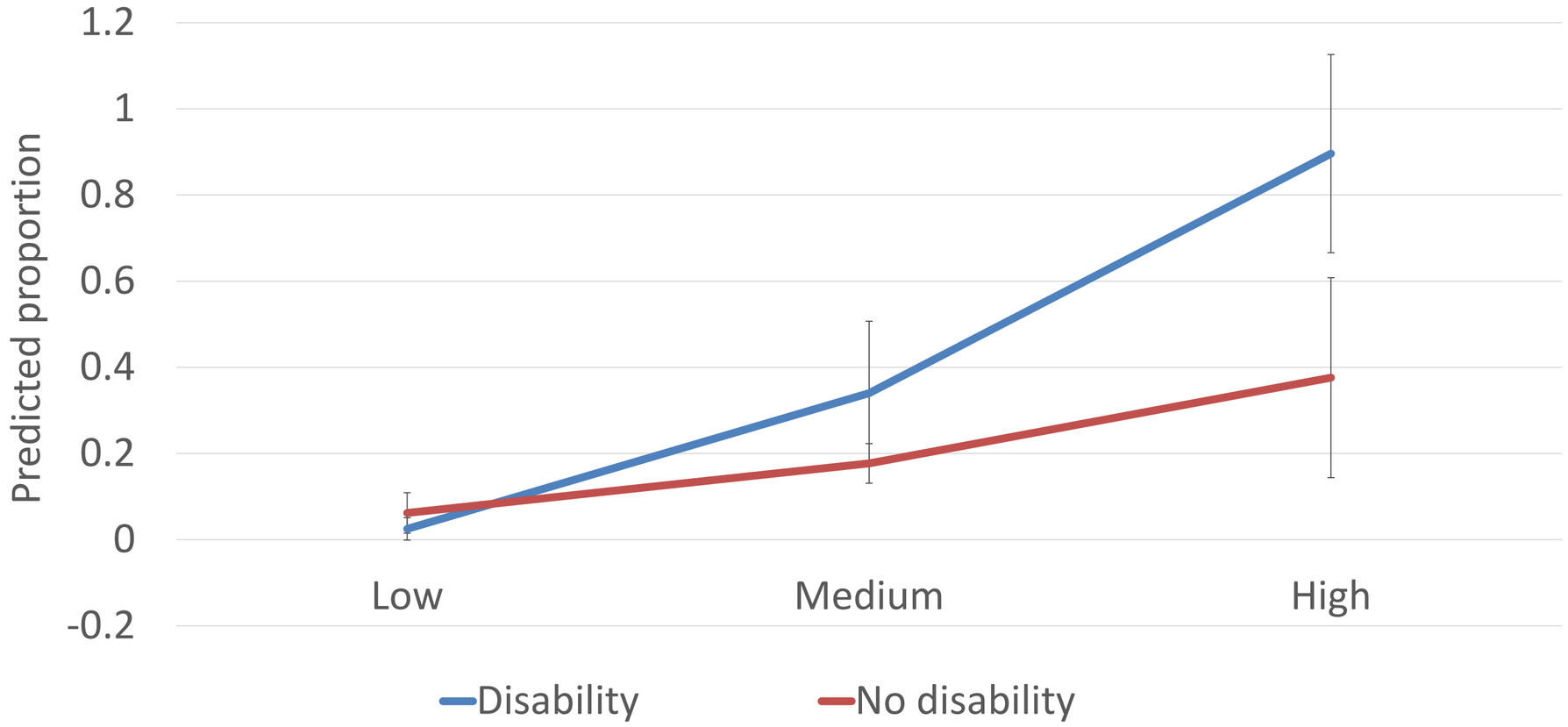
Labelling a behaviour as bullying by frequency of bullying behaviours and disability (predicted probabilities)



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How definition matters: telling an adult

- Being ‘bullied’ (23pp higher)
- More frequent bullying behaviours not significant
- More likely if hurtful material online or texts, gossip, name calling and exclusion
- Less likely if hit or pushed
- More likely if seen as causing harm, especially upset

Conclusions

- Estimates of bullying depend on the definition used – higher prevalence with more behaviourally-specific questions (were you called hurtful names?) than with more direct questions (were you bullied?) (Sjogren et al 2025)
- Media/popular focus on cyberbullying but 'traditional' bullying more prevalent; this focus may have made young people be more likely to consider cyberbullying as 'bullying'
- Significant % do not tell an adult – 30% of 'bullied' vs. 58% of those who experienced bullying behaviour

Implications for policy and practice

- Potential differences between how bullying is defined by young people and by schools/other organisations; implications for telling an adult; social exclusion not always defined as bullying but greatest impact on harm, wellbeing and depression
- Use of inclusive language in policies related to bullying to encompass social exclusion
- Complementarity of anti-bullying policy (repeated behaviour) v. code of conduct (once-off behaviour) – both rooted in fostering a positive school climate
- Importance of bullying policies reflecting lived experience of young people; policy co-creation in schools, other organisations and in the digital space

Thank you

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