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Community Violence and Bullying Among Brazilian Adolescent Students

Violencia comunitaria y acoso escolar entre estudiantes adolescentes brasileños

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Abstract

This study examined whether adolescent groups—bullies, victims, non-involved, and bully-victims—differ in their perception of community violence. Additionally, we investigated whether victimized adolescents differ in their perceptions compared to those who are not victimized and whether aggressors perceive violence differently from non-aggressors. The sample included 194 students (119 females, 61.3%) with a mean age of 17.46 years. Participants completed questionnaires on sociodemographics, bullying behaviors, and perceptions of community violence. Results showed that victims and perpetrators perceived their communities as more violent than non-involved peers. Victims perceived more proximal violence, and relational bullying victims also perceived distal violence. Notably, only verbal aggressors differed from non-aggressors in their perceptions of violence. The findings suggest that victims and perpetrators view community violence differently, highlighting the importance of considering social contexts. Future research should explore other socialization environments, such as family, friends, and school, to deepen understanding of these dynamics.

Keywords: **Bullying; Community; Violence; Adolescents**

Resumen

El estudio examinó si adolescentes agresores, víctimas, no agresores/no víctimas y víctimas/agresores de acoso escolar (*bullying*) diferirían en la percepción de

violencia comunitaria. Además, considerando los cuatro tipos de acoso escolar (ciberacoso, físico, verbal y relacional), investigamos si los adolescentes victimizados diferirían de los no victimizados y si los agresores diferirían de los no agresores, en cuanto a esa percepción. Participaron 194 estudiantes, 119 (61,3%) mujeres (M=17,46 años; DE=1,26). Fueron utilizados: cuestionario sociodemográfico, Escala de Victimización/Comportamiento de Acoso Escolar y Escala de Percepción de Violencia Comunitaria. Víctimas/agresores percibieron sus comunidades como más violentas en comparación con no víctimas/no agresores. Las víctimas de acoso escolar perciben más violencia proximal que las no víctimas, aunque las víctimas de acoso relacional también perciben violencia distal. Solo los agresores verbales difieren en términos de violencia comunitaria percibida (distal y proximal), comparando con los no agresores. Investigaciones futuras deben explorar otros ambientes de socialización, como familia, amigos y escuela, para profundizar la comprensión de esas dinámicas.

Palabras clave: **Acoso escolar; Violencia; Comunidad; Adolescentes**

Introduction

Bullying is defined as repetitive and deliberate aggressive behaviors, which can take the form of verbal, physical, relational, and cyber actions directed at a peer or group of peers (El-ony et al., 2023), who typically have less power and find it harder to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993; Rettew & Pawlowski, 2016). This form of peer violence is recognized as a significant public health challenge globally (Akanni et al., 2020; Romera et al., 2019), given its high prevalence across countries of varying socioeconomic status (Currie et al., 2012; Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). In fact, Kathlin Modecki et al. (2014), in a meta-analytic study (overall sample = 335,519 youth), found a mean prevalence of 35% for traditional bullying around the world. In Brazil, the prevalence varies from 7.2% to 38.9% (Silva et al., 2023).

Similar to other forms of violence, the bullying phenomenon is multifactorial, influenced by individual factors such as gender, age, and race/ethnicity; interpersonal factors including family and peer relationships; and contextual factors such as school and community influences (Azeredo, 2015; Currie et al., 2012).

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), with his bioecological perspective, has long recognized that individuals are embedded within situations that themselves are embedded within broader social contexts. In this sense, context is the “general and continuing multilayered and interwoven set of material realities, social structures, patterns of social relations, and shared belief systems that surround any given situation” (Ashmore et al., 2004, p. 103). Therefore, within the bioecological

perspective, human development is seen as an increasingly complex outcome of reciprocal interactions between individual characteristics and various environmental contexts over the course of development. This ecological model has been applied to bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Swearer et al., 2010; Swearer & Hymel, 2015), as it helps to understand, among other aspects, how community characteristics can influence victimization and bullying behaviors in adolescents.

Studies that seek to understand the effects of the broader context on bullying have begun to investigate specific aspects of the community environment, such as feelings of insecurity, poverty, or gang affiliation in the neighborhood (Swearer & Hymel, 2015) and community violence and disorder in the neighborhood (Azeredo et al., 2023). Besides community violence, disorder in the neighborhood and in the school environment was associated with bullying victimization and perpetration in a sample of 2,108 Brazilian adolescents (Azeredo et al., 2023). In general, it has been suggested that higher rates of bullying occur in communities where violence is modeled or tolerated. However, little is known about the causal nature of these relationships (Swearer & Hymel, 2015).

Community violence can be defined as the type of violence that occurs in the context of a delimited community or neighborhood, which can take the form of homicides, shootings, physical assaults, robbery, and rape (Hill & Madhere, 1996). Since 1993, the Pan American Health Organization (OPAS, 1993) has declared that violence is an endemic and priority health problem, given the number of victims and the emotional consequences that it produces.

Children and adolescents who become direct or indirect victims of community violence may exhibit short-term consequences such as behavioral disorders, aggression, mood disorders, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, including nightmares, flashbacks, psychosomatic issues, and academic difficulties (Dubé et al., 2018; McFarland et al., 2003; Wilson & Rosenthal, 2003). In the long term, exposure to violence is associated with aggressive behavior in adolescence, depression, involvement with drugs and the police (Paxton et al., 2004), antisocial behavior, and conflict with the law (Chang et al., 2003). Moreover, Tara Kuther and Scyatta Wallace (2003), in their study, were able to identify a series of changes in the moral development of adolescents exposed to situations of chronic community violence.

Over the past two decades, research has explored how exposure to community violence relates to bullying behavior (Davis et al., 2020; Elsaesser et al., 2016; Espelage et al., 2000; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Low & Espelage, 2014). In general, there is strong evidence that community violence predicts aggressive violence (Davis et al., 2020; Elsaesser et al., 2016; Foster &

Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Low & Espelage, 2014). Studies that investigate the relationship between exposure to community violence and bullying victimization, however, are scarcer (Lee et al., 2022).

According to the pathological adaptation model of exposure to community violence, repeated experiences of violence within the community lead young people to accept violence as a normative and legitimate strategy for dealing with conflict, thereby increasing their involvement in aggressive behaviors (Esposito et al., 2022). In this respect, Concetta Esposito et al. (2022) found that adolescents who experience higher levels of community violence, whether as witnesses or victims, are more likely to develop morally uncompromised beliefs about violence. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of them perpetrating bullying. Furthermore, according to opportunity theory (Popp, 2012), adolescents who are repeatedly exposed to violence in their neighborhoods are more likely to develop morally uncompromised beliefs about violence and are more inclined to seek out non-conventional peers who engage in maladaptive behaviors, including bullying (Boulton, 2013), as befriending "conventional" peers becomes challenging. Consequently, these adolescents are at greater risk of becoming either aggressors or victims of bullying.

Bearing this in mind, the objective of the present study was to investigate whether adolescents grouped into four types of bullying behaviors (aggressors, victims, non-involved, and victims/aggressors) would differ in terms of their perception of community violence, whether it is diffuse (perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity) or proximate (experience of a close violence situation). For the purpose of this study, diffuse violence refers to a form of violence that is perceived as pervasive and widespread within a community or society but not directly experienced by individuals. It encompasses the general feeling of insecurity and fear that people have due to the prevalence of violence in their environment. On the other hand, proximate violence refers to violence that is experienced directly by individuals. This can include personal encounters with violence, such as being a victim of an assault or witnessing a violent event. Furthermore, considering the four types of bullying (cyberbullying, physical, verbal, and relational), we sought to investigate whether victimized adolescents would differ significantly from non-victimized adolescents and whether aggressors would differ from non-aggressors in the way they perceive community violence.

This study investigates the complex interplay between community violence and bullying among Brazilian adolescents, guided by several theoretical frameworks. The Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a foundational lens, positing that individual development is shaped by nested systems of influence,

ranging from microsystems (e.g., family, school) to macrosystems (e.g., cultural norms, societal structures). This model directly informed our decision to examine both proximal (direct experiences of violence) and distal (perceived pervasiveness of violence in the community) aspects of community violence, recognizing that adolescents' exposure to violence encompasses a range of experiences beyond immediate personal encounters.

Further shaping our understanding is the pathological adaptation model (Esposito et al., 2022). This model proposes that repeated exposure to violence can normalize aggressive behaviors, leading to a higher likelihood of involvement in bullying. Specifically, it predicts that adolescents exposed to higher levels of community violence will demonstrate increased rates of bullying perpetration, particularly among those who also experience victimization. This prediction stems from the model's suggestion that individuals experiencing frequent exposure to community violence may adopt violence as a legitimate strategy for resolving conflict.

Finally, opportunity theory (Popp, 2012) informs our exploration of how community factors might facilitate bullying. This theory suggests that the availability of opportunities for bullying (e.g., through peer networks, community structures) can influence involvement. We therefore explore whether adolescents living in high-violence communities, where violence is potentially more normalized or accepted, exhibit a higher likelihood of both victimization and perpetration of bullying, reflecting an increased opportunity for such behaviors.

In summary, this study employs a multi-theoretical approach to investigate the multifaceted relationships between community violence and bullying. We anticipate that the bioecological perspective will shed light on the proximal and distal influences of community violence, the pathological adaptation model will highlight the normalization of violence leading to increased aggression, and opportunity theory will uncover how community context can create permissive conditions for bullying behaviors

Method

Participants

194 students participated in this study, 119 (61.3%) female and 75 (38.7%) male, with an average age of 17.46 years (SD = 1.26; minimum age = 15 years and maximum age = 21 years), enrolled in integrated courses at the Federal Institute of Science and Technology of Bahia, Brazil. Most participants (55.2%) identified as Pardo (brown), and the majority (52.1%) lived with both parents. High school represented the most common level of education for both mothers (47.9%) and

fathers (39.2%). The type of sampling was by convenience, and the statistical power (1 - ß) of the sample size used was .8. Based on the size of the population (N), the margin of error of 5%, and a reliability margin of 90%, the minimum number of participants required was 191.

Instruments

Sociodemographic questionnaire: It comprises five questions covering information related to age, gender, race/ethnicity, mother's and father's education level, and who they live with.

Bullying Victimization Scale: This scale consists of 30 Likert-type items, ranging from 0 (none) to 4 (four or more times a week), and was developed by Ícaro M. Souza and Emerson D. de Medeiros (2019). Thus, the scale (0-4 times per week) directly addresses the repetitiveness of bullying behaviors. An absence of incidents would score "0," a single incident would score "1," while repeated instances would receive higher scores. The instructions ask participants to indicate how often they have suffered from or been a victim of each item, considering the past month. It is four-dimensional and allows identifying the extent to which an individual has been victimized by physical (11 items; e.g., at my school, lately, I have been the victim of pulling [of hair, underwear, clothes, ears]), verbal (6 items; e.g., colleagues speaking with an aggressive tone of voice towards me), relational (4 items; e.g., exclusion of groups for no apparent reason [e.g., work groups, play groups, etc.]), and cyberbullying (9 items; e.g., insults, through cell phone messages [e.g., WhatsApp] and/or email). Scores are computed separately for each type of bullying. The items assess intentional aggression explicitly, with questions such as "Creation of groups or communities (on blogs and social media) to attack me," "Public exposure of embarrassing situations, real or fabricated, about my life," and "Objects thrown in my direction (e.g., chairs, trash, paper balls, eggs, etc.)." The scale does not explicitly mention power imbalance. However, the items' context suggests it is considered implicitly. Many forms of bullying involve an imbalance of power between the bully and victim. Items that focus on exclusion, social manipulation (relational bullying), and online harassment (cyberbullying) inherently suggest a power dynamic where the victim has less power than the bully. Higher scores in each subscale that measured the different types of bullying mean that the student was a victim of bullying. In the validation study (Gomes, 2020), the results suggest acceptable evidence of validity and precision [CFI = .98, TLI = .98, RMSEA (90% CI) = .032 (.015 – .045)]. The Cronbach's alphas found in the present study were as follows: *victimization by physical bullying* (α = .79), *victimization by verbal*

bullying (α = .81), *victimization by relational bullying* (α = .67), and *victimization by cyberbullying* (α = .63).

Bullying Behavior Scale: This scale also contains 30 Likert-type items ranging from 0 (none) to 4 (four or more times a week) and allows investigating the extent to which an individual practices bullying behaviors in the same four dimensions of bullying: physical (11 items; e.g., I pulled [hair, underwear, clothes, ears]), verbal (6 items; e.g., I made bad jokes with a colleague), relational (5 items; e.g., I isolate myself from colleagues who have certain physical characteristics [e.g., having bow legs, wearing glasses, etc.]), and cyberbullying (9 items; e.g., I made offensive comments on photos of colleagues on the internet). Similar to the Bullying Victimization Scale, the Bullying Behavior Scale addresses the criteria of intentional aggression, repetitiveness, and power imbalance. The scale was developed by Emerson D. de Medeiros et al. (2015) and validated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (AFE), with Cronbach's alphas being as follows: bullying physical = .62, verbal bullying = .79, relational bullying = .60, and cyberbullying = .73. In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas were bullying physical = .72, verbal bullying = .71, relational bullying = .60, and cyberbullying = .70.

Perception of Community Violence Scale: This 5-point Likert scale was adapted from the Neighborhood Safety Scale, which was developed in the context of the study by Dorothy Espelage et al. (2000), consisting of just two items: "I can understand that there is gang activity in my neighborhood or community" and "I live in a safe neighborhood or community." For the purposes of this study, five more items inspired by the "Things I Saw and Heard"—CVO scale (Martinez & Richters, 1993)—were added. The items include seeing someone arrested, beaten, stabbed, or shot; seeing robberies and break-ins; and hearing gunshots in the community where they live. Response options range from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Higher scores mean that the subject perceives more violence in the community.

Our selection of instruments was guided by the study's theoretical framework. The use of multidimensional bullying scales—the Bullying Victimization Scale and the Bullying Behavior Scale—was crucial to capturing the various forms of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyber). This approach aligns directly with the bioecological model's emphasis on the interplay of multiple factors at different levels of analysis. By measuring victimization and perpetration across these four dimensions, we aimed to capture the complex interactions between individual characteristics and environmental contexts that contribute to bullying behaviors. The specific items within each scale (e.g., those measuring cyberbullying) further reflect the influence of the exosystem (broader societal influences such as technology) on the

bullying phenomenon. The relational dimension acknowledges the significant influence of social dynamics and peer relationships within the school and broader community environment.

The decision to utilize a scale measuring both proximal (direct experience) and distal (perceived pervasiveness) community violence directly reflects the Bioecological Model's nested systems approach and the Pathological Adaptation Model's consideration of both direct exposure and the broader social context shaping behavior.

The Perception of Community Violence Scale was subjected to the principal component analysis procedure, in addition to internal consistency analysis. All database adequacy criteria were met (Bartlett sphericity test ≥ .001; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkim test [KMO = .814]), and the rotation method used was Oblimin with Kaizer normalization. Kaiser's criterion was used, which suggests that we should extract only factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1. The criterion for retaining components was .40. Two components were extracted that explained 61.25% of the sample's variability. Table 1 presents the extracted components and their respective items and loadings, in addition to Cronbach's alphas.

Table 1. Extracted components, items, loading coefficient, and Cronbach's alphas from the Perceived Community Safety Scale (n = 194)

Extracted components, items, and Cronbach's alpha	Loading
Component 1 – Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (α = 0.66)	
2. I live in a safe neighborhood or community (was reversed)	.81
7. I have heard gunshots in the community or neighborhood where I live	.76
1. I see gang activity in my neighborhood or community	.65
Component 2 – Experience of a close violence situation (α = 0.75)	
6. I have seen scenes of robberies and break-ins in the community or neighborhood where I live	.84
4. I have seen someone get beaten up in the community or neighborhood where I live	.74
3. I have seen someone arrested in the community or neighborhood where I live	.70
5. I have seen someone get stabbed and/or shot in the community or neighborhood where I live	.62

Data collection procedure

This research project, conducted in accordance with Brazilian national ethical guidelines (Resolutions 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council), received approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Southern Bahia (registration number 4.594.739, CAAE: 40189420.6.0000.8467) on March 16, 2021.

Prior to data collection, the institution's director signed a consent form, formalizing the agreement to conduct the research. All participants over 18 years of age provided informed consent; for minors, informed consent was obtained from both the parents/guardians and the student themselves. The study was presented to participants during class time via Google Meet, with the class teacher present to facilitate understanding and address any immediate questions. Participants were given clear and easily accessible online survey links, and the researcher remained available to answer any further questions. Measures were taken to minimize social desirability bias; participants were assured of the complete anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, emphasizing that their individual identities would not be linked to their survey data. This process ensured ethical data collection and minimized potential bias.

Data analysis

This is a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional, relational, and *ex post facto* study. The data were analyzed using descriptive (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) and inferential statistics to test the study hypotheses. To verify the normality of distribution of the data, skewness and kurtosis coefficients were used, with acceptable values being considered for those found in the range of −2 and +2 (Hair et al., 2022). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was also used to test the normality of the variables under study. Once we found that the distributions of the variables were non-normal, we decided to use non-parametric tests for all analyses. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to compare the different groups of bullying typologies (victim, aggressors, victims/aggressors, and non-involved) with regard to community violence. In order to extend the analyses, to compare the two groups (victims and non-victims; aggressors X non-aggressors) of four types of bullying (cyberbullying, verbal, relational, and physical) regarding perception of community violence, we use the Mann-Whitney test.

Results

Descriptive analysis

Regarding victimization, 66 (34%) were victims of cyberbullying, 123 (63.4%) of verbal bullying, 72 (37.1%) of physical bullying, and 83 (42.8%) of relational bullying. In respect to bully behaviors, 17 (8.8%) were cyberbullying aggressors, 101 (52.1%) verbal bullying aggressors, 36 (18.6%) physical bullying aggressors, and 28 (14.4%) relational bullying aggressors. Regarding typologies, 16 students (8.2%) were only aggressors, 45 were only victims (23.2%), 94 were victims/aggressors (48.5%), and 39 (20.1%) had no involvement in bullying behaviors (non-involved).

Perception of violence

To assess participants' levels of perception of community violence, we must consider the midpoint of the scale and the confidence interval of the means. The scale measuring the two types of community violence has 4 points, with the midpoint being 2.5. The mean perception of distal violence was 1.31 (SD = 0.94; 95% CI: 1.18–1.44). Since the CI values were strictly below the midpoint of the scale, it is deduced that participants exhibited low levels of perception of distal community violence. Similarly, the mean perception of proximal community violence was 0.58 (SD = 0.68; 95% CI: 0.49–0.68). The CI values are even further below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting that participants perceive very low levels of this type of violence in their community.

Inferential analysis

An effect tendency and a significant difference were found in relation to the two types of perception of exposure to violence: perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity, $x2(3) = 7.42$; $p = .06$, and experience of violence close to their daily lives, $x2(3) = 9.57$; $p \leq .05$. Table 2 presents the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H Test for the scores on perception of exposure to community violence when comparing different types of bullying behaviors.

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis H test to compare the mean rankings of perception of exposure to community violence between different types of bullying groups (n = 194)

Exposure to community violence/Typologies	Non-involved (n = 39)	Aggressor (n = 16)	Victim (n = 45)	Victim/ aggressor (n = 94)	*p*-value
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/ feeling of insecurity	**80.91**	95.19	90.86	107.96	.06§
Experience of violence close to your daily life	**79.21**	85.44	93.62	109.00	.02*

§ Effect tendency

* Significant difference at p ≤ 0,05

Note: The values highlighted in bold show where the group differences are located after using Tamnhane's *post hoc* test.

As shown in Table 2, adolescents in the group that have no involvement in bullying have the lowest rankings among all groups (which means that they perceive less violence in their community), and those who belong to the victim/aggressor group have the highest rankings (which means that they perceive more violence).

As a way of deepening the analyses, a comparison was made between groups of adolescents who have already suffered some form of bullying and those who have never suffered, and between those who have been bullies and those who have never been, with regard to the way they perceived violence in their community (in

terms of perception of diffuse violence, distance/feeling of insecurity, and experience of the situation of close violence). These analyzes were carried out considering the types of bullying separately (cyberbullying, physical, verbal, and relational). Table 3 presents the results of these comparisons.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test comparing the mean rankings of students who have already been victims of some type of bullying and those who have never been in relation to community violence (n = 194)

	Mann Whitney U Test		
	Mean Ranks		
	Victim of cyberbullying (n = 66)	**Non-victims (n = 128)**	*p*-**value**
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	97.08	97.71	.94
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	106.43	92.89	.10§
	Victim of verbal bullying (n = 123)	**Non-victims (n = 71)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	101.43	90.69	.20
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	106.73	81.51	.00**
	Victim of physical bullying (n = 72)	**Non-victims (n = 122)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	104.42	93.41	.18
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	106.70	92.07	.07§
	Victim of relational bullying (n = 83)	**Non-victims (n = 111)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	107.78	89.81	.03*
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	110.77	87.58	.00**

§ Effect tendency
* Significant difference at p ≤ .05
** Significant difference at p ≤ .01

Table 3 shows a tendency of effect (Z = -1.637, p = .10) that indicates that victims of cyberbullying, when compared to non-victims, tend to perceive their communities as more violent, specifically when violence is experienced closer to their lives (for example, when they have witnessed someone being stabbed, arrested, or beaten), even if only once. The same tendency could be observed in the group of students who had already suffered physical bullying (Z = -1.804, p = .07). When

a tendency of effect is observed, we can admit that it would be confirmed if the sample size was larger.

Furthermore, victims of verbal and relational bullying, compared to non-victims, also experience this type of violence more closely in their lives (Z = -3.100, $p \leq .01$, and Z = -2.929, $p \leq .01$, respectively). Finally, victims of relational bullying also perceive more diffuse violence in their neighborhoods (they have heard gunshots, know that there is gang activity, and feel unsafe in the community, Z = -2.220, $p \leq .05$).

Table 4 presents the results of the comparison between adolescents who reported some aggressor-type behavior and those who said they had never committed any type of bullying in terms of perception of diffuse violence, distance/feeling of insecurity, or more proximal violence.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test comparing the average rankings of students who have already practiced some type of bullying and those who have never practiced it in relation to community violence (n = 194)

	Mann Whitney U Test		
	Mean Ranks		
	Aggressor of cyberbullying (n = 17)	**Non-aggressor (n = 177)**	***p*-value**
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	99.12	97.34	.90
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	113.94	95.92	.19
	Aggressor of verbal bullying (n = 101)	**Non-aggressor (n = 93)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	105.59	88.71	.03*
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	105.69	88.61	.03*
	Aggressor of physical bullying (n = 36)	**Non-aggressor (n = 158)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	109.82	94.69	.14
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	106.04	95.55	.30
	Aggressor of relational bullying (n = 28)	**Non-aggressor (n = 166)**	
Perception of diffuse violence, at a distance/feeling of insecurity (distal violence)	103.48	96.49	.54
Experience of violence close to your daily life (proximal violence)	106.54	95.98	.34

* Significant difference at p ≤ .05

Table 4 shows that adolescents who practice cyberbullying, physical bullying, or relational bullying do not differ from non-bullies with regard to these variables. On the other hand, verbal aggressors perceive more diffuse/distant violence in their communities and feel insecure (Z = -2.106, $p \leq .05$) and also experience more violence close to their lives (Z = -2.178, $p \leq .05$).

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate whether adolescents grouped into four types of bullying behaviors (aggressors, victims, neither aggressors nor victims, and victim-aggressors) differ in their perception of community violence. Additionally, considering the four types of bullying (cyberbullying, physical, verbal, and relational), we examined whether victimized adolescents differ significantly from non-victimized adolescents and whether bullies differ from non-bullies in how they perceive community violence.

First of all, the unexpectedly high percentage of verbal bullying (63.4%) in this study compared to other research warrants careful consideration. Several factors could contribute to this discrepancy: The study focused on a specific population of Brazilian adolescents attending a particular Federal Institute of Science and Technology. This specific context may have unique characteristics influencing the prevalence of verbal bullying. Cultural norms, school environment, peer dynamics, and socio-economic factors within this specific group could contribute to higher verbal bullying rates. Generalizability to other populations needs caution. The study's operational definition and measurement of verbal bullying might differ from those used in other studies. Variations in questionnaire design, wording of questions, and scoring criteria can influence the reported prevalence. Subtle differences in how "verbal bullying" is defined can significantly alter the results. For example, some studies may focus primarily on direct insults, while the present study included indirect forms like "making bad jokes about me" or "things that people say and make me cry," thus leading to varying numbers.

Regarding the perception of exposure to community violence, we found that victim-aggressors perceive their communities as more violent, both in terms of diffuse (distal) and proximal violence. Conversely, students not involved in bullying perceive less community violence. Victim-aggressors are a particularly problematic group of bullies characterized by low self-esteem, aggressive, and provocative attitudes. It has been suggested that they exhibit behavioral problems, seeking to humiliate their schoolmates to compensate for their limitations, while simultaneously becoming victims themselves (Flannery et al., 2023). It is plausible to consider that their increased risk of behavioral problems at school is due to greater exposure to community violence, whether from distant (distal) or

nearby (proximal) sources. This suggests that community violence may impact school violence, as students may normalize and reproduce the violent behaviors they perceive. It is well known that bullying behaviors may be related to an unfavorable social environment (Silva et al., 2023) and community violence (Davis et al., 2020; Elsaesser et al., 2016; Espelage et al., 2000; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Low & Espelage, 2014). In fact, according to the pathological adaptation model of exposure to community violence, repeated experiences of violence within the community may lead peers to accept violence as a normative and legitimate strategy for dealing with conflicts in their relationships (Esposito et al., 2022). Furthermore, according to opportunity theory (Popp, 2012), repeated exposure to neighborhood violence is linked to the development of morally uncompromised beliefs about violence and an increased inclination to seek out peers who engage in maladaptive behaviors, including bullying (Boulton, 2013), thereby increasing the odds of becoming either a victim or a bully.

When considering all forms of bullying and comparing victims to non-victims, we found that victims of cyberbullying and physical bullying tend to experience more proximal violence (violence close to their daily lives) compared to non-victims. Similarly, victims of verbal and relational bullying also report higher exposure to this type of violence. Additionally, victims of relational bullying perceive more diffuse or distant violence in their neighborhoods. These results indicate that victims more frequently perceive proximal violence as a part of their daily lives. This suggests that these students are doubly victimized, being subjected to both community and school violence, which can further compromise their mental health and well-being, making the issue even more challenging to address.

Furthermore, the results show that victims of verbal and relational bullying perceive violence in their immediate surroundings more intensely than victims of physical bullying and cyberbullying. The study's findings regarding the varied associations between community violence and different types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyber) likely reflect the multifaceted nature of both phenomena. Several factors could contribute to these differences: the types of bullying differ in their mechanisms and impact.

Physical bullying involves direct physical harm, potentially leading to more immediate, tangible consequences. Cyberbullying, while impactful, often lacks direct physical contact. Verbal and relational bullying, however, are insidious. They inflict emotional and psychological damage, often subtly and pervasively eroding a victim's sense of safety and well-being. This subtle, ongoing nature might make victims more acutely aware of and sensitive to broader societal violence in their environment, as their sense of security is already compromised.

We found that victims of relational bullying perceived both proximal (close to their daily lives) and distal (distant/diffuse) violence in their neighborhoods. Relational bullyingParte superior do formulário often exploits social hierarchies and relationships. The power dynamics involved in this type of bullying might amplify the victim's sense of vulnerability and their perception of danger, impacting how they experience and interpret violence in their community, whether it is distal or proximate. Physical bullying, while also involving power imbalances, often manifests more directly and visibly, which might focus the victim's experience more on the immediate incident than broader societal issues.

Finally, there is a possibility of reporting bias influencing the results. Victims of physical bullying may be more likely to report the physical aspects of their experiences, while victims of verbal or relational bullying might focus on their feelings of insecurity and the broader implications for their safety and well-being. This could lead to a perceived difference in the level of association between community violence and specific bullying types.

In short, the varied levels of association may not reflect a simple cause-and-effect relationship between community violence and specific bullying types but rather a complex interplay of factors related to the nature of the aggression, the victim's perception and experience, the social dynamics, and even the way these experiences are reported. Further research is crucial to disentangle these influences and arrive at a more complete understanding.

The association between community violence and aggressive behavior has been strongly established (Davis et al., 2020 Elsaesser et al., 2016; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Low & Espelage, 2014). On the other hand, studies that investigate the relationship between exposure to community violence and bullying victimization are rarer (Lee et al., 2022). Thus, the results from the current study may help to fill this gap.

The current study found that adolescents who engage in cyberbullying, physical bullying, or relational bullying do not differ significantly from non-bullies in their perception of community violence. However, verbal bullying aggressors do differ significantly in their perception of both diffuse/distant and proximal violence compared to non-bullies. It is noted that analyses involving bullies of all four types yielded fewer significant results, possibly due to the small number of adolescents who admitted to being bullies: 17 (8.8%) were cyberbullying aggressors, 36 (18.6%) were physical bullying aggressors, and 28 (14.4%) were relational bullying aggressors. This small sample size may have prevented detecting an effect that actually exists. Conversely, the group of verbal bullying aggressors was relatively large (n = 101, 52.1%), which likely contributed to finding statistically significant differences.

Besides, an additional explanation regarding cyberbullying may be plausible. Scholars in the field argue that the rise of social networks has introduced new avenues for socialization, entertainment, and knowledge sharing. However, they also highlight the potential for these platforms to pose dangers to the development of children and adolescents by reinforcing inappropriate attitudes and influencing aggressive behaviors (Beane, 2010; Garay, 2012). Therefore, it is conceivable that the influence of virtual communities on cyberbullying behavior could be greater than that of physical communities.

Another possible explanatory hypothesis for the non-significant results found could be that students who engage in bullying live in communities where violence is so prevalent that it becomes normalized for them—they may not even consciously perceive it. Furthermore, because they themselves exhibit aggressive behaviors, they might identify with the violent norms of their community. They may report perceptions of violence with a bias towards self-protection, feeling secure among peers who also engage in violence, as violence in their community is commonly perpetrated by their peers and friends. To test this hypothesis, future studies should investigate the impact of community violence normalization on students who engage in bullying. Exploring this phenomenon could provide valuable insights and contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between community violence and bullying behaviors.

Nevertheless, these results in some ways corroborate the literature indicating that broader contextual factors, such as exposure to community violence, are associated with aggressive verbal behavior (Davis et al., 2020; Elsaesser et al., 2016; Espelage et al., 2000; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013; Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2004; Low & Espelage, 2014). Thus, it is possible to interpret, as Jiménez and Estévez (2017) suggest, based on Uri Bronfenbrenner's theory, that understanding the acts of violence that permeate social relationships during adolescence requires considering these occurrences not as isolated incidents but as influenced directly and indirectly by their surrounding contexts. According to Ferrer et al. (2011), school victimization should be understood as a complex social process tied to adolescents' developmental context; it results from interactions between the individual and their environment, including family, school, and community. Top of FormTherefore, both distant, diffuse community violence and closer, proximal violence within the community impact violence within the immediate context of the individual, including the school environment (Pinto & Assis, 2013). In school settings, aggression manifests in various forms of antisocial behavior, including the verbal violence examined in this study.

Final considerations

This study represents one of the initial attempts to evaluate the perceptions of community violence (both distal and proximal) among adolescent students in the Brazilian context, examining its relationship with various bullying typologies (non-victims/non-aggressors, victims, aggressors, and victims/aggressors). Additionally, the study compared victims and non-victims, as well as aggressors and non-aggressors, across four types of bullying concerning their perception of community violence.

Initially, the study found that victims/aggressors perceive their communities as more violent, whether this violence is diffuse (distal) or proximal, particularly when compared to those not involved in bullying. Furthermore, victims of all four types of bullying more frequently perceive proximal violence as a part of their daily lives compared to non-victims, although victims of relational bullying also report more frequent perceptions of diffuse or distant violence in their neighborhoods. Finally, only bullies who engage in verbal aggression differ significantly in terms of their perceived community violence, whether it is diffuse/distant or proximal, compared to non-bullies.

This study represents an advancement in relation to other national studies on bullying by investigating the role of a variable (community violence) that has received limited attention in Brazil. Moreover, the instrument used to measure community violence distinguishes between distal and proximal violence, providing a more nuanced understanding of how levels of community violence may relate to bullying victimization and aggression. Additionally, we either utilized instruments validated for the Brazilian context or conducted a preliminary validation of scales not previously validated in the country.

Like all studies, this research also has several limitations: it employed convenience sampling, and the sample size is relatively small, collected from a single educational institution. Therefore, caution is needed when generalizing the findings beyond this specific context, such as to other regions in Brazil or even the state of Bahia. Furthermore, non-parametric tests were utilized due to non-normal data distribution, which are less powerful and may increase the risk of failing to reject the null hypothesis when it is false (type I error). However, these tests were deemed appropriate given the data's characteristics.

Additionally, this study is cross-sectional in nature, which limits our ability to track changes over time. Future studies should consider longitudinal data collection to explore how perceptions of community violence predict changes in bullying behaviors over time. Moreover, future research could further investigate the

influence of other socialization contexts such as family, friends, and schoolmates to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon.

This study reveals a strong link between community violence and bullying among Brazilian adolescents, particularly verbal bullying. Practical implications include enhancing school-based anti-bullying programs to address the impact of community violence, providing early intervention for students exhibiting both victim and aggressor behaviors, and training staff to recognize and support affected students. Community-level violence prevention initiatives are crucial, alongside increased access to support services for vulnerable students and families. Policymakers should develop collaborative strategies between education, law enforcement, and social services to comprehensively address both community violence and bullying. Further longitudinal and qualitative research is needed to refine these interventions and improve understanding of the complex interplay between these issues.

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