

Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer victimization in a Canadian  
context

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### Abstract

Researchers have consistently shown that as a society, we have failed to protect a large number of Aboriginal children and youths from violence and aggression across multiple contexts. Aboriginal children and youth are at a disproportionate risk of being involved in violent victimization ranging from homicides, family violence, and physical and sexual abuse compared to the rest of Canadian children and youth. However, the extent to which Aboriginal children and youths are involved in bullying remain largely unknown. In the present study, data from a Canadian population-based study was used to examine ethnic and sex differences in children's and youths' involvement of different forms of bullying (general, physical, verbal, social). Participants were categorized into three broad ethnic groups: Aboriginal, Caucasian, and ethnic minority. Results indicated that across the forms of bullying, Aboriginal children and youths were more frequently involved than their non Aboriginal peers. Sex differences also emerged, such that, Aboriginal boys were more frequently physically victimized than their non Aboriginal, same sex peers while no ethnic group differences were found for girls. The results highlight the need for an Aboriginal-specific bullying policy and specialized programs and services at school to support this vulnerable group of Canadian school-aged children.

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Canadian Context

There is a collective agreement among researchers that violence is a pressing issue facing Aboriginal people in Canada. Although not every Aboriginal person's life is marked by violence, it is well established that Aboriginal people are disproportionately victimized across multiple contexts (Carter & Polevychok, 2004; Fontaine-Brightstar, 1992; Long, 2004; Mihorean et al., 2001; Moyer, 1992; Roberts & Doob, 1997). Overall, they are twice as likely to be victims of violent assaults (i.e., physical, sexual, robbery) (Perreault, 2011) and seven times more likely to be victims of homicide than non Aboriginal people (Brzozowski, Taylore-Butts, & Johnson, 2006). They are also at a higher risk of being victimized multiple times compared to their non Aboriginal counterparts (Perreault, 2011). An important risk factor for Aboriginal victimization is age, with nearly half of the victims being between the ages of 15-24 years (Perreault, 2011). These statistics point convincingly to the fact that Aboriginal people, and especially young Aboriginals, are a vulnerable group of Canadians.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that Aboriginal men and women experience victimization differently. Research has shown that men are disproportionately victims of violent victimization and crime (Perreault, 2011), while the most pervasive forms of victimization against Aboriginal women are domestic and sexual assault (Chartrand & McKay, 2006). The studies that specifically examined Aboriginal women's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) found that Aboriginal women reported being victimized at a significantly higher rate than non Aboriginal women (Brownridge 2008; Brzozowski, Taylore-Butts, & Johnson, 2006; Ontario Native Women's Association, 2007). Similarly, when other forms of non IPV were considered (i.e., sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault), Aboriginal women

were almost three times more likely to be victimized than other Canadian women (Brennan, 2011). Experts contend that the high prevalence of Aboriginal victimization is related to the unique historical and social context that they live in, which places them at risk for institutional and interpersonal forms of violence and abuse (Chartrand & McKay, 2006). To further complicate matters, Aboriginal exposure to and experiences of various forms of violence have been found to be related to violence perpetration (Rojas & Gretton, 2007). Indeed, Aboriginal people are overrepresented as perpetrators of violence and crime across the life span (Dauvergne, 2008; Dauvergne & Li, 2006), with youths and adults ten times more likely to be accused of homicide (Brzozowski, Taylore-Butts, & Johnson, 2006) and eight times more likely to be in custody than non Aboriginal Canadians (Latimer & Foss, 2004). The statistics on Aboriginal violence are disturbing because being a perpetrator or victim of aggressive and violent acts pose serious negative social, health, and life course outcomes for individuals (Arsenault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2010; World Health Organization, 2002), as well as threaten community safety and cohesion (Kroes, 2008). Since the impact of violence are immediate and far reaching, it is important to consider Aboriginal people's involvement in violence earlier on in life. As such, the focus of the study was on Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer victimization for the purposes of early prevention and intervention.

### **Violence and Victimization Among Aboriginal Children and Youths**

Previous studies on Aboriginal violence and victimization have greatly contributed to our understanding of the magnitude in which Aboriginal adults are involved in violence and victimization while research on Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of victimization is far less in comparison. The available studies revealed that Aboriginal children and youths are faced with disproportionately high levels of suicide, family violence, sexual assault, and violent

victimization (Hanselmann, 2001; Kroes, 2008). As perpetrators of violence, Aboriginal youths (ages 12-17) were more likely to be in custody and on remand for serious offences (homicide/ attempted homicide, serious assault, and serious sexual assault) than other Canadian children (Bittle, Hattem, Quann, & Muise, 2002). The number of Aboriginal children and youths engaging in gang-related activities is also alarming, with about 22% of all gang members in Canada identified as being Aboriginal (Totten, 2009). There is also a concern that Aboriginal girls are increasingly involved in aggression (Van der Woerd, 2006). Given that research has revealed that a greater number of Aboriginal children and youths are affected by violence in their home and community than their non Aboriginal counterparts, there is reason to suspect that Aboriginal children's and youths' safety at school would also be compromised. Therefore, the goal of the study was to compare Aboriginal children's and youths' levels of bullying involvement to their ethnic majority and minority peers' involvement in bullying. This is an important topic because we need a better understanding of whether Aboriginal children and youths are also vulnerable (as either perpetrator or victim) to this form of abuse. To the extent that Aboriginal people's experiences of violence and victimization differ from the experiences of non Aboriginals, it is expected that Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in bullying would also differ from their non Aboriginal peers.

Several large scale studies have shown that bullying is widespread in Canada, with over one third of children involved in school bullying (Adlaf, Paglia-Boak, Beitchman, & Wolfe, 2007; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Being involved in bullying, either as a perpetrator or victim has been linked to serious, short- and long-term adjustment difficulties across multiple life domains (see Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010 for review). Bullying has been linked to other forms of aggression and violence, externalizing difficulties and antisocial tendencies

(Olweus, 1993). Children who are bullied reported experiencing internalizing and externalizing problems, physical ailments (headaches, stomachs, sleep problems), poor peer relations, and academic difficulties (see Knack et al., in press for review). The negative correlates of bullying have prompted policy makers to take action against bullying in schools across Ontario. Under Bill 212 (2007), bullying is now considered a serious infraction for which a school suspension is warranted. Educators are also required to report and respond appropriately to incidences of bullying and other behaviours that negatively affect the school climate (Bill 157, Keeping Our Kids Safe at School, 2009). Finally, school boards in Ontario are required to adopt a strategy to address bullying prevention and intervention and have the policy in place by February 2010 (Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 144, Bullying prevention and intervention, 2009). Given that bullying is a major concern among policy makers and educators alike, another consideration of the thesis was how the findings may inform current school policies on bullying.

### **Definition of Bullying**

On the continuum of aggression and violence, bullying is a subtype of aggression and is differentiated from other aggressive and violent acts in that it is an extreme, chronic form of peer abuse (Olweus, 1972). Bullying is also about the “systematic abuse of power” (Smith & Sharp, 1994, p.2) where a more powerful individual or group of individuals repeatedly and intentionally aggresses upon a less powerful person (Olweus, 1999). The nature of the power imbalance can be physical, psychological, or social but in almost all instances, the victims are unable to defend themselves against the aggressors (Smith & Sharp, 1994). It has been suggested that power imbalances can take place between racial/ethnic groups, where some individuals are victimized by virtue of belonging to a minority group that is perceived to be less powerful and lower in social status than another group (Scherr & Larson, 2010). The power relationship is context-

specific in that a society has its own history of particular groups who have been or continue to be oppressed and marginalized from the dominant society (Rigby, 2004). In Canada, the power imbalance is felt among Aboriginal people; their basic human rights have been repeatedly violated while their current realities reflect that of a second class citizen (Kubik, Bourassa, & Hampton, 2009). The power dynamic between Aboriginal and non Aboriginals may also be felt among children and youths at school, placing Aboriginal students at risk for being bullied by their peers. In the following sections an overview of Aboriginal people's current and historical status in Canada is presented. Next, the unique challenges that Aboriginal children and youths face as a consequence of the historical and social contexts that Aboriginal people live in are considered.

### **The Status of Aboriginal People in Canada**

Many Aboriginal people do not enjoy the same standard of living that many non-Aboriginal Canadians are privileged to. For instance, although Canada placed 8<sup>th</sup> on the international stage for quality of life according to the United Nations well-being index, if the same standards were to be applied to Aboriginal communities, these communities would rank 76<sup>th</sup> (Assembly of First Nations, 2010). The census data also revealed a similar reality for Aboriginal people; compared to other Canadians, they were significantly more likely to live in poverty, live in substandard and over crowded housing, be unemployed and suffer from physical and mental health problems (Statistics Canada, 2008). There is also a wide gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non Aboriginals, with one-third of Aboriginal adults having not completed high school compared to a national average of only 13% (Statistics Canada, 2008). Experts have long argued that these oppressive conditions are a breeding ground for aggression and violence among Aboriginals (Reading & Wien, 2009). Moreover, the inequities

that exist for Aboriginals is presumably linked to historical and social factors including colonization, residential schools, discriminatory government policies, and racism against Aboriginal culture (Latimer & Foss, 2004; Reading & Wien, 2009; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Trocme et al., 2003). Accordingly, the historical and social context becomes important when considering violence among Aboriginal people.

### **The Historical and Social Context of Aboriginal People in Canada**

Many Aboriginal people live in high risk environments that significantly increases their vulnerability for violence and victimization. In order to understand their present situation, some experts maintain that research involving Aboriginal people should consider their history of colonialism (e.g., Brownridge, 2003; Brownridge, 2008; Hunter, 1993; Memmot, Stacy, Chambers, & Keys, 2001). Since Aboriginal people's earliest encounters with European settlers, they have been thought of as primitive, savage, or "brutish, wild and stupid" (Dickason, 2005, p.123), with their cultural practices ranked "low on the scale of human values" (Friesen & Friesen, 2008, p. 37). These beliefs were part of the process of naturalizing European presence and dominance over the "Indian" since Europeans thought that they were more morally, culturally, and technologically advanced (Furniss, 1992). The notion of European superiority/Aboriginal inferiority made its way into the laws and policies during colonialism to disempower Aboriginal people (Francis, 1992). Colonialism has also drastically changed Aboriginal women's status in the family as well as in the larger society. Prior to European contact, the Aboriginal culture was mainly matriarchal; however, the European values and beliefs of male superiority imposed upon their culture left Aboriginal women powerless and susceptible to systemic and domestic violence (Brownridge, 2003; Brownridge, 2008; Ontario Native Women's Association, 1989).

Historically, Aboriginal people were systematically segregated from the rest of the Canadian population through the establishment of the reserve system and the passing of the Indian Act of 1876. According to the Act, Indians did not have the mental capacity to decide what was best for them and so they were prevented from having rights and privileges of citizenship. For example, they could not vote, buy liquor, or obtain land for fear they would abuse these rights (Francis, 1992). They were also labelled as wards of the federal government, and so it was the government's responsibility to assimilate and transform the "savage Indian" into a productive citizen of Canada (Friesen & Friesen, 2008). The subsequent political agenda of assimilation was to be achieved through the seemingly innocuous method of education in residential schools.

The operation that took place however resulted in the destruction of individual identities, families, communities, and the Aboriginal culture to the extent that experts and survivors labelled the practice as the "Canadian Holocaust" (Morrisette, 1994) and "the vanguard of genocide" (Reading & Wien, 2009, p.21). Children were forcefully removed from their home and community and placed into an institutional setting where they would be taught the White, Christian way (Tobias, 1976; see also Trevithick, 1998). Unfortunately, these children lived in impoverished conditions and were forced into labour work without being provided any formal education (Furniss, 1992). They were often punished for their resistance to the acculturation process and many children suffered extreme physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of the caregivers at the residential schools (Furniss, 1992; Haig-Brown, 1988). Not only did these traumatic experiences result in immediate negative physical and mental health consequences for the children, but they learned inappropriate behavioural patterns that were destructive to their future interpersonal relationships. Many generations of Aboriginal people

grew up with a lack of parenting skills and break down of community kinship systems (Ing, 1991). In addition, the cultural disconnect, identity confusion, and feelings of hopelessness and shame contributed to overt and self-destructive forms of violence as coping mechanisms (Comeau & Santin, 1995).

The policies and practices that were imposed upon Aboriginal people by the dominant group was a deliberate abuse of power that resulted in severe harm for generations of Aboriginal people (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). These historical processes may have undermined the Aboriginal culture and serve to legitimize people's discriminatory beliefs and poor treatment of Aboriginal people in contemporary Canadian society (Brownridge, 2003; Brownridge, 2008). Indeed, many non Aboriginal Canadians continue to respond to the Aboriginal situation with insensitivity, blame, and punitive measures for their suffering, anger, and violent response to an oppressive colonial system (Long, 2004). It is not uncommon to hear people refer to Aboriginals as "lazy" and "drunks" with reference to the high unemployment rates and drug abuse problems (Paul, 2006). The media has also played a large part in shaping public opinion and discourse of the Indian. News reports often portrayed Aboriginal people as violent or being in conflict with mainstream Canadian society (Harding, 2005), while popular culture represented Aboriginals as primitive and unable to advance with time (Francis, 1992). These negative perceptions of Aboriginal people are in part a result of deeply entrenched stereotypes that have permeated nearly all social institutions and settings to influence how they are currently treated (Environics Institute, 2010).

### **The Challenges Facing Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youths**

Aboriginal children and youths are not spared from the hostile and inequitable conditions that Aboriginal communities are battling against (Van der Woerd, Cox, & McDiarmid, 2006).

Within Aboriginal communities across Canada, the children are three to seven times more likely to die in infancy and 50 times more likely to be hospitalized with preventable medical conditions when compared to the rest of Canadian children (Eni, 2009). Aboriginal children's and youths' well being have also been found to differ by geographical location (on reserve/off reserve).

While Aboriginal children and youths in general are significantly more likely to live in poverty than non Aboriginal children and youths, over half of those residing in metropolitan areas live in impoverished conditions, compared to 25% of the children and youths living in poverty on reserves (Statistics Canada, 2008). Younger Aboriginals living off reserve have a higher success rate of achieving a post-secondary degree compared to those living on reserve, although both rates still fall under the national average (Statistics Canada, 2008).

Notwithstanding the importance of regional effects on Aboriginal children's and youths' well being, the focus of this thesis was on the bullying and victimization experiences of those living off-reserve. It is important to document the experiences of this particular group because the Aboriginal population is becoming increasingly urban, with the majority of the population living off-reserve being children and youths (Statistics Canada, 2008). As such, there has been research that revealed the specific challenges and barriers that have affected urban Aboriginal children and youths' well being and integration into mainstream society; they experienced a loss of identity, language, and culture, which makes drugs and gang involvement an attractive alternative (Chalifoux & Johnson, 2003). Aboriginal youths also reported difficulties obtaining accommodation and relevant health services in the cities that they reside (Chalifoux & Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, the younger urban Aboriginal population have reported more problems in school than in business, work, and government settings (EKOS Research Associates INC., & Anishinabek Consultants INC., 2006).

Schools are a microcosm of the larger society, and the pre-existing social structures and power relationships may also apply to the school culture to influence children's peer relations (Dessel, 2010; Lewis, 2003). Consequently, Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences in school seem to parallel the systemic oppression and violence that Aboriginal communities are struggling with, placing them at risk for being victimized by their peers. In Canada, there is a lack of research on school bullying and ethnicity in general, and on Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in bullying in particular. In the section that follows, a literature review of existing studies on bullying and ethnicity across countries is presented, with a particular focus on studies involving an Aboriginal population.

### **Review of the Bullying and Ethnicity Literature**

Research on ethnic group differences and bullying is sparse and inconclusive. Earlier studies conducted in Europe have mostly found no ethnic differences in the prevalence of bullying and peer victimization. However, these studies tended to have small sample sizes (Boulton, 1995; Moran, Smith, Thompson, & Whitney, 1993) or compared ethnic majority (European native) and ethnic minority (non-European native) without differentiating among ethnic groups (Siann, Callaghan, Glissov, Lockhard, & Rawson, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993). The latter is important as the relationship between bullying and ethnicity may be dependent on the power dynamics in a particular society (Rigby, 2004).

In the US, studies on bullying and ethnicity have found that African American students were more often involved as either bullies (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Graham & Juvonen, 2002; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003) or victims (Peskin, Tortolero, & Markham, 2006) compared to other ethnic minority and White American children. The literature on violent victimization revealed a similar pattern; African American people were

disproportionately involved in violent victimization either as perpetrator or victim than compared to those from other ethnic minority groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Hammond & Yung, 1993). The findings of African American children's experiences of bullying and peer victimization in school may have mirrored the social realities of African American communities. Their overrepresentation in violence and crime may be linked to the extreme socioeconomic and political disadvantages experienced by this ethnic minority group of Americans (see Williams & Collins, 1995). Although there have been improvements in government legislations and policies to address the needs of this particular minority group, African American youths continue to be at risk for violence as a consequence of and response to the inequities that their communities experienced (Williams & Braboy Jackson, 2005).

In Canada, Aboriginal people are one of the more disadvantaged visible minority groups. Yet this group, as well as other ethnic minority groups, have been under-represented in the bullying and ethnicity literature. In a study comprising of 1093 children and youths in grades 7-11, Pepler, Connolly and Craig (1999) found no differences in the proportions of ethnic minority and majority students who self-identified as a bully or victim. It is possible that categorizing ethnic minority children and youths into a single homogeneous group can overlook the unique challenges and experiences of specific ethnic minority groups that make them more vulnerable to bullying and peer victimization. In the case of Aboriginal people, they are native to Canada yet they have been conquered and displaced from power by the dominant group. The power imbalance remains until this day, with Aboriginal people striving to gain political and socioeconomic equality (Assembly of First Nations, 2010). Consequently, this power relationship combined with systemic oppression and racism towards Aboriginals likely makes Aboriginal children and youths prime targets for bullying.

### **Aboriginal Children's and Youths' Experiences of Victimization at School**

Aboriginal people in Australia and the US share a similar history of colonialism to those in Canada (see Bachman, 1992; Memmot, Stacy, Chambers, & Keys, 2001). Researchers in these countries have begun to document the peer victimization experiences of Aboriginal children. Rigby (2002) conducted a large scale study consisting of 38487 students (Aboriginal students comprised 2% of the sample) on their experiences of five forms of bullying (being teased in an unpleasant way, being called hurtful names, being left out of things on purpose, being threatened with harm, being hit or kicked). It was found that a greater proportion of Aboriginal students were bullied than non Aboriginal students across all forms of bullying, though the difference in the proportions was not large. Still, the study provided some support for ethnic differences in bullying with more Aboriginals being victims of peer aggression. In another sample consisting of only Aboriginal students, an overwhelming 40% of primary school-aged children reported witnessing or experiencing bullying on a daily basis (Coffin, Larson, & Cross, 2010), although their involvement in bullying as perpetrator or victim was not individually reported. The results of the above studies are further limited by not having considered ethnic differences in bullying perpetration. The inclusion of bullying perpetration and victimization in the examination of ethnic differences would provide insight into which groups of students are involved in different aspects of bullying.

Some recent US studies have also included an Aboriginal comparison group when examining the relationship between bullying and ethnicity. A large study of 4746 ethnically-diverse students' (grades 7-12) experiences of relational peer harassment based on five items (you were treated with less respect than other people, people act as if they are better than you, you are called names or insulted, teased about your appearance, teased about your weight) found

that White and Aboriginal youths experienced more harassment than African American, Hispanic, Asian, and youths of mixed race (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003). It is unclear whether the results would extend to physical forms of victimization. A more comprehensive study of bullying behaviours involving over 75000 US students in grades 6-12 was conducted by Carlyle and Steinman (2007). The researchers measured the frequency of peer victimization during the past school year utilizing 13 survey items that consisted of both direct (e.g., "... how often has someone physically attacked you?" and indirect (e.g., "...How often have other students spread lies or false rumors about you?") forms of bullying. Students were bullied by their peers if they responded "4 or more times" to at least one of the 13 items. Utilizing this cut-off Aboriginals was the only group that was disproportionately victimized by their peers. The US studies provided additional evidence for Aboriginal children and youths being most at risk for direct and/or indirect forms of aggression compared to children and youths from other ethnic minority or majority groups. A similar limitation of the US studies was that the researchers did not compare group differences on bullying perpetration across the various forms of bullying.

In Canada, very few studies have been conducted on Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in school victimization. When high school students (n = 2600) were asked about their experiences of being attacked (have been hit, slapped, or beaten up in the last year), a greater proportion of Aboriginal students (42.4%) reported being victimized than their non Aboriginal peers (30.1%) (Eisler & Schissel, 2004). Similar results were obtained from over 4800 Aboriginal respondents in three waves of data collected for the Adolescent Health Survey in 1992, 1998, and 2003. It was found that the rates at which Aboriginal youths in grades 7-12 were excluded, verbally, and physically harassed by another youths while at school, or going to

and from school were significantly higher for Aboriginal children than non Aboriginal children across the times in which the surveys were conducted (Van der Woerd et al., 2005). These results also differed by sex; Aboriginal girls were significantly more likely than boys to report being verbally harassed or excluded while boys were significantly more likely to report being physically assaulted. These findings are consistent with sex differences found in the bullying literature. Studies have established that boys are predominantly involved in physical or overt forms of bullying (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Rigby, 2000; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Sex differences on children's involvement in relational or social bullying is less clear, with some studies reporting no sex differences (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg., 2001; Vaillancourt, Duku, Decatanzaro, MacMillian, Muir, & Schmidt, 2008) while others reporting that girls are more involved than boys (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992; Borg, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In the present study, we were also interested in examining the possible effects of sex in relation to Aboriginal and non-aboriginal children's experiences of peer abuse while controlling for their age. We used age as a covariate because it has been found to be a strong correlate of bullying, with a higher prevalence reported in younger children than older children (Olweus, 1991; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Vaillancourt et al., 2010; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

From the studies reviewed thus far, there is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal children and youths are not spared from aggression and violence in the schools that they attend. However, there are potential factors that moderate their involvement in these problematic behaviours. Research has shown that the presence of a caring adult in the home, at school, or within the community fosters healthy development in children and youths (Masten, 2001;

O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, & Muyeed, 2002). Several school variables also emerged as protective factors; for example, having a supportive teacher-child relationship and greater peer acceptance significantly decreased the likelihood of children being involved in aggression at school (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). At a broader level, effective policies and regulations can create a safe and positive learning environment for children at school (Small et al., 2001). In light of the evidence showing that Aboriginal children and youths are at risk for being involved in violence, sensitive policies are necessary to support the needs of this vulnerable group of Canadians. Indeed many Aboriginal organizations are calling for a strong political desire and commitment in the forms of policies and relevant legal decisions to address the disparities that exist between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people (Assembly of First Nations, 2010; National Council of Welfare, 2007). We now turn to a a brief overview of policies addressing Aboriginal violence and victimization at all levels of government to see how Aboriginal people are currently supported.

### **Policy Responses to Aboriginal Violence in Canada**

In Canada, the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) implements laws and regulations on behalf of the Government of Canada to fulfill historic treaties as well as address land claims and rights to self government for Aboriginal people (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2010a). The AANDC is committed to improving Aboriginal health and well being by providing safe water supplies on reserves, and funding for education, early childhood development, housing, assistance for persons with disabilities, and income assistance. As well, the AANDC acknowledged the importance of protecting and empowering Aboriginal people who are affected by family violence. Although special attention to family violence is imperative given the proportion of Aboriginal people who

are involved, all forms of violence are prevalent among Aboriginal people and therefore should be included in Aboriginal-specific policies.

The Urban Aboriginal strategy (UAS) is the only one of its kind that was developed by the Government of Canada to address the complex needs of urban Aboriginal women, children and families in priority areas such as improving life skills, job training skills, and providing support services (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2010b). Under the UAS, several domestic and general violence and crime prevention programs were developed in 13 high risk cities in Canada. In general, the programs were well-received by most government agencies and Aboriginal participants; however, serious barriers have been noted (Alderson-Gill & Associates Consulting Inc, 2005). In their formative evaluation of the implementation of the UAS, Alderson-Gill and associates (2005) found that the strategy fell short of receiving ongoing support from senior management in partner departments and government agencies, and lacked committed funding at the local federal level as well as within provinces and municipalities.

The national crime prevention strategy policy framework is an initiative to curtail violence and crime in Canada (Public Safety Canada, 2009). According to the framework, Aboriginals have been identified as a vulnerable group, and so community-based programs have been developed and evaluated for this population. Still, the national crime prevention strategy is not an Aboriginal-specific legislation, so the implementation of the programs is piecemeal, with no systematic way of addressing the issue of violence across Aboriginal communities in Canada. It would not be surprising that many at-risk Aboriginal adults, children, and youths would fall between the cracks, because there is no policy that supports an anti-violence strategy for this group. As such, the higher rates at which Aboriginal people are currently involved in violence

and crime compared to non Aboriginals may be an indicator that existing national government strategies are not adequately addressing Aboriginal people's needs.

At the provincial level, schools bear the bulk of the responsibility for violence prevention and intervention. Since all children between the ages of six and 18 are expected to attend school (Education Act, 1990), it is imperative that anti-violence policies are sensitive to the needs and safety of *all* students. Most provinces and territories across Canada have adopted a Safe Schools Act or policy (Sharma & Vaillancourt, 2007). An act refers to laws or statutes that are enacted by parliament while a policy refers to a plan of action or basic principles by which a government is guided. In Ontario, Bill 81, also known as the Safe Schools Act (Act) was legislated in 2000 to increase school safety by delineating the roles and responsibilities that each person has in maintaining a safe environment, as well as specifying when and under what conditions a disciplinary action is warranted. According to the Act, threatening or causing bodily harm on another person, possessing alcohol or illegal drugs, swearing, and committing an act of vandalism are among the few infractions that would result in a suspension of at least one day. The Act required that administrators and educators should consider mitigating factors in their disciplinary actions, as well as be trained in cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity.

In a report presented to the Human Rights Commission of Ontario, Bhattacharjee (2003) revealed that following the legislation of the Act, front line workers and community agencies saw a disproportionate rise in the number of visible minorities (e.g., Aboriginal, South/Latin American, South Asian, East Asian and Southeast Asian) and especially Black students, being suspended or expelled from school. Many interviewees who participated in the study noted that discrimination was a major reason why visible minority students were overrepresented in school suspensions. It was further noted that the disciplinary approach of the Act was failing Aboriginal

children because it took on a punitive approach, which is not consistent with a community approach that is embraced by the Aboriginal culture. Since then, several amendments were made to the Act so that it is more sensitive to the diverse needs of the students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). For example, the concepts of anti-racism, anti-discrimination and cultural awareness must be included in teacher and administrative training as well as in the school curriculum so that the whole school community has the opportunity to learn about diverse perspectives. Additionally, funding was allocated for programs aimed at reducing youth violence; of those, the African Canadian Youth Justice Program and the Down with Guns Program were specifically developed for an African Canadian student population. The remainder of the violence prevention programs were aimed at a general audience, with no other visible minority groups given special consideration. The lack of specialized programs for Aboriginal children run contrary to the position of the national crime prevention strategy policy framework in acknowledging Aboriginal people as a vulnerable group and thus require programs and services that target their specific needs. As such, at the provincial level, there is a lack of policies in place to support Aboriginal children and youths on the issue of school violence.

### **A Scan of Ontario School Board Bullying Policies**

School boards across Ontario were required to adopt a bullying prevention and intervention strategy according to a set of guidelines under Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 144, Bullying Prevention and Intervention (2009). School boards must implement programs that address discrimination based on: age, race, sexual orientation, gender, faith, disability, ethnicity, and socio-economic disadvantage. The policy must also include a training component for administrators, teachers, and staff working directly with students that respects diversity and special needs education, is culturally sensitive, and addresses gender-based and homophobic

bullying. When drawing up their policies, boards should take into account “local needs and circumstances, such as geographical considerations, demographics, cultural needs, and availability of board and community supports and resources” (Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 144, Bullying Prevention and Intervention, 2009). As such, it is essential that boards consult with school councils, principals, teachers, students, parents, the Special Education Advisory Committee, social service agencies, members of Aboriginal communities, and other relevant community partners when developing their bullying prevention and intervention strategies. Finally, the policy must reflect the principles in previously established policies such as Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools (2009) and the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Although several safeguards were in place to ensure that board policies on bullying were responsive to diversity and multiple student needs, our scan of 24 school board bullying policies in Ontario that are available on the board's website revealed that the vast majority of boards did not identify student groups who would benefit from specialized programs (see Appendix). There were only five boards that acknowledged vulnerable groups. Of those, all five identified special needs and exceptional students with an Individual Education Plan, while only one board identified racialized students and another identified English language learners and Aboriginal students for the purpose of developing culturally sensitive bullying prevention and intervention programs. It is puzzling as to why the rest of the school boards did not identify Aboriginal students as a vulnerable group for involvement in bullying when Aboriginal children and youths are disproportionately involved in various forms of violence and victimization. In contrast, the Ontario Ministry of Education have responded to the educational achievement gap between

Aboriginal and non Aboriginal students with an Aboriginal-specific education policy framework to support their learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). The framework called for more Aboriginal staff working in schools as well as developing a culturally sensitive pedagogy, curriculum, and support services focusing on Aboriginal histories and perspectives to improve Aboriginal children's learning and achievement in school. Without a similar kind of school violence/bullying policy in place to support Aboriginal children, they may be at risk of falling victim to bullying.

### **The Current Study**

In light of the paucity of research that exists on bullying and ethnicity in Canada, and in particular the extent to which Canadian Aboriginal children and youths are involved in bullying and peer victimization, the purpose of the study was two-fold. The first aim of the study was to explore Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer victimization in comparison to their peers from the majority group (Caucasian) and those from all major ethnic minority groups in Canada (Asian Canadian, South Asian Canadian, Middle Eastern Canadian, African Canadian, South/Latin American) while controlling for their age. We also examined whether Aboriginal and non Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying varied by sex. The study adds to the bullying and ethnicity literature in the following ways. First, the relationship between peer victimization and ethnicity has been examined in Europe and the US, but far less is known from a Canadian context. Moreover, there is a gap in knowledge on how Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer victimization compare to the experiences of non Aboriginal children and youths. Second, studies that exist on Aboriginal victimization in Canadian schools have seldom considered such behaviours in a bullying context. The study improves upon the existing studies by using a widely accepted definition of bullying

to assess the different forms of peer abuse. The use of a standard definition is necessary because cultural variations exist for the construct of bullying (Murray-Harvey, Slee, & Taki, 2010). As well, Vaillancourt and colleagues' study (2008) revealed discrepancies in children's and researchers' understanding of bullying, leading to differences in the prevalence of bullying depending on whose definition was utilized.

The second aim of the study was to consider whether school policies currently reflect an aspect of Aboriginal children's and youths' well being at school, as measured by their involvement in school bullying. The results of the study have immediate implications for practice, such that, the findings can provide school administrators and educators with a starting point as to which groups of students may be at risk of being involved in bullying in Ontario schools. At a broader level, the results provide policy makers with information as to whether current school policies on bullying are effective at addressing the needs of *all* students and if revisions are necessary to better accommodate their diverse needs.

### **Hypotheses**

Aboriginal children's and youths' high rate of victimization is related to the unique historical and social context not experienced by other ethnic minority and majority groups in Canada. Furthermore, there are no anti-violence/bullying policies currently in place to support Aboriginal students at school. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that Aboriginal children and youths would be disproportionately victimized by their peers at school compared to Caucasian and all other ethnic minority children and youths (*Hypothesis 1a*). Studies have suggested that Aboriginal children and youths are more likely than non Aboriginal children and youths to experience physical, verbal, and social forms of victimization (Eisler & Schissel, 2004; Van der Woerd et al., 2005). Therefore, it was expected that compared to ethnic minority and majority

children and youths, Aboriginal children and youths would be most frequently victimized across all forms of peer victimization (*Hypothesis 1b*). We assumed a non directional hypothesis for Aboriginal children's and youths' perpetration of bullying. On the one hand, their over involvement as perpetrators of violence and crime makes them likely to also engage in other forms of aggressive behaviours such as bullying at school. On the other hand, bullying involves an imbalance of power where the aggressor(s) holds more power over their victim; in this case, Aboriginal children are part of an oppressed group in Canada and would be more likely to be aggressed upon. Finally, we explored whether ethnicity and sex interacted with bullying behaviours without stating a hypothesis since there are not enough studies to guide the direction. However, based on the existing bullying research, we hypothesized that there would be a main effect of sex for physical bullying; such that, that boys would be more involved in physical bullying than girls across the sample (*Hypothesis 2*).

## **Methods**

### **Recruitment**

The present study utilized existing data collected from a Canadian population-based study. Following ethics and school board approval, 65 schools from a large public school district in southern Ontario were contacted to participate in the Online Safe School Survey (Vaillancourt et al., 2010a). The survey included questions about school safety, bullying, and victimization for all grades; additional questions about violence and substance abuse were asked for students in grades 7-12 only. All 65 schools agreed to participate. Parents were sent a consent form for their child to participate in the survey (98% consent rate).

### **Participants**

Overall, 11097 students participated in the study. Since some students did not answer the question regarding their ethnicity, only those who indicated being affiliated with an ethnic background were included in the analyses. Those students who gave a suspicious answer or indicated “I don’t know” were also excluded from the sample. After applying these two exclusionary criteria, the sample consisted of 9220 participants. Additionally, students who indicated “Other” (3.69%) were excluded from the analysis because children of mixed ethnicities may experience additional challenges in their relationship with their peers than those who are from one ethnic group only (Stein, Dukes, & Warren, 2007). We also acknowledge that there are likely important patterns of bullying and peer victimization among students who identify as “other;” however, the focus of the study was to examine how experiences of bullying and peer victimization among Aboriginal children and youths differ from experiences of White children and youths as well as those who identify as being part of one ethnic minority group. Finally, students who did not indicate their sex or age were excluded from the final sample since both variables were needed for the analyses.

The final sample was 8783 students with approximately equal numbers of girls ( $n = 4325$ ) and boys ( $n = 4458$ ) from a large public school district in southern Ontario serving a socio-economically diverse community. Students were in grades 4 to 12 (age range: 8 - 18,  $M = 12.91$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ). The ethnic distribution of the sample is as follows: White 74.1%, Asian-Canadian 7.0%, South Asian-Canadian 5.9%, Middle Eastern-Canadian 4.8%, African-Canadian 4.7%, South/Latin American 1.5%, and Aboriginal 2.0%. Participants who indicated their ethnicity, compared to those who did not, differed statistically on various measures of bullying involvement. Children who identified with an ethnic group reported higher engagement in general bullying ( $t(11095) = 4.31$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), verbal bullying ( $t(11095) = 4.47$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), and

social bullying others ( $t(11095) = 3.25, p < .001$ ). Conversely, students who did not identify their ethnicity reported being victims of physical ( $t(11095) = 6.11, p < .0001$ ), verbal ( $t(11095) = 3.17, p = .002$ ), social ( $t(11095) = 3.00, p = .003$ ), and general forms of bullying ( $t(11095) = 4.42, p < .0001$ ) more often than those who did identify with an ethnicity. There were no statistically significant differences in levels of physical bullying between the two groups. In sum, participants in the final sample bullied others more often but were less likely to be bullied than students who did not indicate their ethnicity.

### Measures

**Ethnicity.** According to the 2006 Census, Canada's population is made up of more than 200 ethnic origins. Since it is not possible to include all ethnic groups in the present study, children were categorized into seven representative ethnic groups that took into consideration the diversity of Canada's population. To determine the student's ethnic background, students were prompted with the following statement: "People sometimes think about themselves in terms of race or the colour of their skin. If you feel comfortable identifying yourself in this way it may help us to find out if this is one of the reasons students are bullied. You do not have to answer this question if you do not wish to do so. (Check more than one if appropriate)". Students chose from the following options: Caucasian (White), Asian-Canadian (Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, etc.), South Asian-Canadian (Indo-Canadian, East Indian, Pakistani, etc.), Middle Eastern-Canadian, African-Canadian (Caribbean, Black, etc.), South/Latin-American, Aboriginal, Other, or I don't know. Based on the student's responses to the ethnicity question, they were categorized into one of three groups for the purpose of the analyses: Aboriginal, Caucasian/White, and Ethnic minority. The latter group consists of students who identified with any of the ethnic minority groups except for Aboriginal.

**General bullying and peer victimization.** To assess the student's bullying experiences, students were first provided a standard definition of bullying from Olweus (1986) and adapted by Whitney and Smith (1993, p. 7): "We say a student is being bullied when another student, or a group of students say nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is hit, kicked, threatened, locked inside a room, sent nasty notes, when people don't talk to him or her and things like that. These things may take place frequently and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend him/herself. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a negative way. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight". Students were then asked to complete two self-reported questions that tapped the extent of their bullying involvement (Olweus, 1996), "How often have you bullied other students at school in the past 3 months?" and "How often have you been bullied at this school in the past 3 months?" using a 5-point likert-type scale: 1 = never, 2 = only once or twice, 3 = 2 or 3 times a month, 4 = once a week, and 5 = several times a week.

**Different forms of bullying and peer victimization.** Students were asked to consider the definition of bullying when answering the following questions that specifically asked for their experiences of different forms of bullying and peer victimization: How often have you physically bullied others at school during the past three months? (Examples: hit, kicked, pushed, slapped, spat on or otherwise physically hurt you)/ How often have you been physically bullied at school during the past three months? (Examples: hit, kicked, pushed, slapped, spat on or otherwise physically hurt you); How often have you verbally bullied others at school during the past three months? (Examples: said mean things to you, teased you, called you names, verbally threatened you)/ How often have you been verbally bullied at school during the past three months? Examples: said mean things to you, teased you, called you names, verbally threatened

you); How often have you socially bullied others at school during the past three months?

(Examples: Excluded others from your group, gossiped, spread rumours, or made others look foolish)/ How often have you been socially bullied at school during the past three months?

(Examples: Excluded others from your group, gossiped, spread rumours, or made others look foolish). Students answered the questions using the same 5-point scale used for the general bullying and peer victimization questions.

### **Procedure**

In January and February of 2007, students who received parental permission to participate and agreed themselves to participate in the study completed an online Safe School Survey in the computer labs of their schools while being supervised by their teachers. Prior to the start of the testing, teachers read out standard information pertaining to the survey, including the purpose of the survey, student anonymity, and parental consent. There were about 30 students completing the survey at a time, with the testing period lasting approximately 30 minutes. Participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw from the study at any given time.

### **Analytic Plan**

Ethnic and sex differences in bullying involvement (either as a perpetrator or victim) were evaluated using a between-subjects multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) for each form of bullying (general, physical, verbal, social). In these analyses, ethnicity and sex were the independent variables, age was the covariate, and bullying behaviours were the dependent variables. We used both bullying and peer victimization as dependent variables in the multivariate analyses because these behaviours tend to co-occur, with positive correlations ranging from .20 to .50 (e.g., Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). For each MANCOVA, we

first tested for two-way interactions followed by main effects only if the interaction was not significant. When significant interactions were found, we proceeded to evaluate whether ethnic differences existed for boys and girls separately (simple main effect of ethnicity at each level of sex). Finally, if multivariate and/or univariate results suggested that ethnic group differences exist, follow up pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction method to determine which groups were most affected by bullying and/or peer victimization.

Prior to conducting the analyses, the assumptions of MANCOVA were tested. The bivariate associations between different forms of bullying and peer victimization were checked to ensure that the dependent variables, bullying and peer victimization, were moderately and significantly correlated. We found that there were significant correlations ( $ps < 0.01$ ) across types of bullying and peer victimization, thus confirming our decision to include both bullying and peer victimization as outcomes in the multivariate analyses (Table 1). The assumption that there needs to be a linear relationship between the covariate and the dependent variables was checked using scatter plots; the graphs indicated that the assumption has not been violated. Next, the assumption of homogeneous regression slopes was checked by requesting a custom analysis to test the interaction of the independent factors, ethnicity and sex, with the covariate, age for children's bullying and victimization scores. All interactions were non significant with the exceptions of general and verbal forms of bullying for ethnicity and age ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that the assumption has been met for the most of the data that will be used in the analyses.

In the final sample, we have unequal ethnic group sizes which makes our data sensitive to violations of the assumptions of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices for the multivariate tests. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), in cases where there are unequal sample sizes and assumptions are violated, the Pillai's Trace multivariate statistic should be used

instead of the other multivariate tests (e.g., Hotelling's, Wilks', Roy's) because it is the most powerful and robust. Following their recommendation, Pillai's Trace was used to analyze the multivariate results when the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices was violated. Finally, due to the large sample size, we evaluated the multivariate and univariate statistics with a more stringent alpha level of .01 to reduce the likelihood of a type 1 error.

## Results

### Bullying Prevalence

Using the cut-offs recommended by Solberg and Olweus (2003), the overall prevalence of bullying involvement was 21%. An examination of the specific types of bullying involvement showed that 5.5% of the children were classified as bullies, 11.6% were classified as victims, 3.9% were classified as someone who bullies others and is also bullied (bully-victims), and 79% were classified as not involved in any bullying behaviours.

### Ethnicity and Sex Differences in Bullying and Peer victimization

**General bullying and peer victimization.** An ethnicity by sex MANCOVA was performed on the linear combination of general bullying and peer victimization scores. The two way interaction was not significant. There was a statistically significant main effect of ethnicity on the linear combination of general bullying and peer victimization, after age was covaried out,  $F(4, 17552) = 20.13, p < .001$ ; Pillai's Trace = .009; partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ . The univariate results further revealed that the effect of ethnicity was statistically significant for both general bullying  $F(2, 8776) = 22.07, p < .001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , and peer victimization  $F(2, 8776) = 25.54, p < .001$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .006$ . Using the Bonferroni correction method, all ethnic group comparisons were tested at an alpha level of .003 (.01/3) and sex differences were tested at an alpha level of .005 (.01/2). Follow-up pairwise comparisons on the adjusted group means for bullying revealed

that Aboriginal children and youths reported the highest level of bullying, followed by Caucasian, and then ethnic minority children and youths (Table 2). Group comparisons for peer victimization showed that Aboriginal and Caucasian children and youths were bullied most while ethnic minority children and youths were bullied least (Table 2).

**Physical bullying and peer victimization.** There was a significant two-way interaction between ethnicity and sex on the linear combination of physical bullying and victimization,  $F(4, 17552) = 3.69, p = .005$ ; Pillai's Trace = .002; partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . Univariate tests confirmed that the interaction was significant for physical victimization only,  $F(2, 8776) = 6.78, p = .001, \eta^2 = .002$ . When ethnic group differences in peer victimization for boys and girls were examined, it was found that Aboriginal boys were significantly more victimized than ethnic minority boys while they were marginally more victimized than Caucasian boys ( $p = .007$ ) (Table 3). In contrast, no ethnic differences in peer victimization were found for girls. Additionally, the results revealed that boys were more frequently victimized than girls. For physical bullying, there were significant main effects of ethnicity,  $F(2, 8779) = 12.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .003$  and sex,  $F(1, 8780) = 178.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ . Aboriginal children and youths reported bullying their peers most often compared to children and youths from the other two groups (Table 4). Finally, boys reported higher levels of bullying than girls (Table 5).

**Verbal bullying and peer victimization.** The sex by ethnicity interaction was not significant; however, the MANCOVA results revealed a significant main effect of ethnicity on bullying involvement,  $F(4, 17552) = 16.44, p < .001$ ; Pillai's Trace = .007; partial  $\eta^2 = .004$ . Univariate results confirmed that the relationship between ethnicity and verbal bullying was significant,  $F(2, 8776) = 13.67, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , with Aboriginal children and youths reporting the highest level of engagement, followed by Caucasian children and youths reporting

the second highest, and ethnic minority children and youths reporting the lowest level of bullying (Table 6). There was also a significant effect of ethnicity on verbal victimization,  $F(2, 8776) = 27.99, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ . Post hoc analyses on the adjusted means revealed that Aboriginal and Caucasian children and youths were more victimized than their ethnic minority peers (Table 6). The main effect of sex on verbal bullying and peer victimization was not significant.

**Social bullying and peer victimization.** The two way interaction was not significant. There was a statistically significant main effect of ethnicity on the combined dependent variables,  $F(4, 17552) = 11.64, p < .001$ ; Pillai's Trace = .005, partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ . The univariate results revealed that ethnic differences exist for both social bullying,  $F(2, 8776) = 13.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .003$ , and social victimization,  $F(2, 8776) = 14.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .003$ . Aboriginal children and youths reported taking part in social bullying more often than children and youths from the ethnic minority and majority groups (Table 7). There were no group differences in social bullying between Caucasian and ethnic minority children and youths. The follow-up group comparisons for social peer victimization revealed that Aboriginal and Caucasian children and youths were bullied most frequently while ethnic minority children and youths were least victimized (Table 7). A main effect of sex emerged on the linear combination of social bullying and victimization,  $F(2, 8775) = 12.67, p < .001$ ; Pillai's Trace = .003; partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ . When the dependent variables were considered separately, both social bullying,  $F(1, 8776) = 13.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .001$ , and social victimization were significant,  $F(1, 8776) = 19.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .002$ . An examination of the adjusted means revealed that girls are more frequently perpetrators and victims of social bullying than boys (Table 8).

Overall, it was found that Aboriginal children and youths are more involved in bullying, either as a perpetrator or victim than their majority or ethnic minority peers. When different forms of bullying were considered, Aboriginal children and youths remained as the one group that is more involved in both aspects of bullying. An ethnicity by sex interaction emerged for physical victimization only; such that Aboriginal boys were more physically victimized than their non Aboriginal, same-sex peers while Aboriginal girls experienced similar levels of physical victimization compared to their non Aboriginal, same-sex peers. Finally, it was found that boys were more involved in physical bullying while girls were more involved in social bullying.

### **Discussion**

Violence and victimization among Canadian Aboriginal children and youths in the context of family and community violence as well as involvement in the criminal justice system are widely recognized, while their experiences of school bullying and victimization have received far less attention (e.g., Chartrand & McKay, 2006; Perreault, 2011). This is largely due to the lack of research on the scope of the problem of school victimization for this group of Canadian children and youths. The purpose of the study was to examine whether ethnicity and sex play a role in bullying and peer victimization by utilizing data from a population-based study of Canadian school-aged children. Specifically, we were interested in determining the extent to which Aboriginal children and youths differ in their level of bullying involvement with two non-Aboriginal comparison groups (ethnic majority and ethnic minority children and youths).

#### **Ethnic Group Differences in Children's and Youths' Experiences of Peer Victimization**

The definition of bullying that was employed in the thesis emphasized the aggressive, intentional, repetitive, and power imbalance nature of bullying. Following from the viewpoint

that the power relationship in bullying can extend to racial/ethnic divides, several hypotheses were put forth. We expected that Aboriginal children and youths would experience higher levels of bullying compared to their non Aboriginal majority and minority peers because they belong to the most oppressed and disadvantaged group in Canada. This hypothesis was partially supported for Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of peer victimization. Consistent with studies revealing that Aboriginal children and youths are at a higher risk for being victimized at school compared to non Aboriginal children and youths (e.g., Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Eisler & Schissel, 2004), the results of the present study indicated that Aboriginal children and youths were more frequently bullied than ethnic minority children and youths. We further hypothesized that Aboriginal children and youths would experience the highest level of victimization across all forms of bullying. Again, the results partially supported this hypothesis, with a similar pattern of results as general bullying, suggesting that Aboriginal children and youths are bullied more than their ethnic minority peers.

Although both Aboriginal and ethnic minority children and youths are considered visible minorities in Canada, Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of peer victimization may be a reflection of the broader society's poor treatment of Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal (or Indigenous) populations around the world, they are typically seen as the less powerful or inferior group in society because they were subjected to colonialism (Rigby, 2004). It may be that Aboriginal people's lower social status makes Aboriginal children and youths prime targets for being victimized compared to other ethnic minority groups. The results further underscore the need to differentiate among visible ethnic minority groups since not all minority groups experience peer victimization equally (see Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002).

Interestingly, we found that being part of the majority group is not a protective factor for peer victimization since Caucasian children and youths reported being more victimized than their ethnic minority peers. This finding may seem contrary to the expectation that Caucasian children and youths would report the lowest level of peer victimization because they belong to the dominant group; however, the result may be dependent on school factors that were beyond the scope of the study. In general, researchers have found that schools with a greater ethnic diversity, as measured by the number of ethnic groups represented in a setting and the degree to which they are represented, at both the classroom and school levels were associated with lower levels of peer victimization (Graham, 2006; Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). Others have found that being a member of the numerical majority or minority at school is related to peer victimization, such that, a greater proportion of Dutch (White) children within a school was associated with less victimization for Dutch children but more victimization for ethnic minority children in the Netherlands (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). Along the same lines, Hanish and Guerra (2000) found that White children are at a higher risk of being victimized if they attend ethnically diverse schools where White children were not the numerical majority. It could very well be that the power imbalance in the bullying relationship would be less pronounced in schools with a greater ethnic diversity because the power would be dispersed so that there is not a single, numerically dominant group (Graham, 2006).

### **Ethnic Group Differences in Children's and Youths' Experiences of Bullying**

Since our study was one of the first to include a measure of bullying perpetration, we explored the extent to which Aboriginal children and youths reported bullying others compared to their non Aboriginal peers without stating a directional hypothesis. The results revealed a consistent pattern for Aboriginal children and youths across the forms of bullying; they bully

others most frequently compared to non Aboriginal children and youths. Aboriginal children and youths live in environments that make them more vulnerable to becoming involved in risky behaviours (i.e., alcohol and illicit drug use, gang involvement, prostitution) than non Aboriginal children and youths (National Council of Welfare, 2007), so bullying could be considered another risky behaviour that they engaged in.

An alternative explanation could be that bullying may be a way in which Aboriginal children and youths acquire power at school. The historical and social inequities that Aboriginals are experiencing deprives them of control and purpose over their lives, which in turn may make some seek power or dominance through negative means such as aggression and violence (see Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). Drawing from research on Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in gang violence, many gang members expressed that their main reasons for engaging in violence and gang-related activities were to obtain money, power, and a sense of belonging (Totten, 2008). Similarly, in incidences of Aboriginal IPV, the perpetrators (usually men) seek to dominate their victims (usually women) by controlling finances and/or physically abusing their partner (Brownridge, 2008; McEachern, Winkle, & Steiner, 1998).

### **Sex Differences in Children's and Youths' Experiences of Bullying and Peer Victimization**

The sex differences that were found for bullying and peer victimization were consistent with past studies indicating that boys are more involved in physical bullying (e.g., Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vemberg, 2001; Rigby, 2000; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993) while girls are more involved in social forms of bullying (e.g., Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz & Kaukiainen, 1992; Borg, 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Moreover, the findings of the study suggested that Aboriginal boys were more physically bullied compared to Caucasian and

ethnic minority boys. This finding is disconcerting given that Aboriginal boys are also most affected by physical forms of victimization in other domains of their life (Perreault, 2011). In contrast, Aboriginal girls experienced similar levels of physical victimization compared to their non Aboriginal, same-sex peers. The lack of significant findings for Aboriginal girls was surprising given that research has shown that Aboriginal women and girls are more victimized than non Aboriginal women and girls (e.g., Brennan, 2011). However, previous studies (e.g., Brownridge 2008; Chartrand & McKay, 2006) also revealed that Aboriginal women are profoundly affected by domestic and sexual assault so it may be that these are the forms of victimization that would most differentiate their experiences from the rest of the Canadian women.

### **Implications**

The Government of Canada has acknowledged that the social, economic, and health disparities that exist between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people are in part tied to historical abuse and exploitation of Aboriginals by the government through discriminatory policies and forced programming (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). In order to improve Aboriginal people's well being, Aboriginal-specific policies must be in place to redress the problems they are currently facing. Policies are important for several reasons; they bring awareness to the importance of an issue as well as serve as the government's public commitment to resolving the issue (Hanselmann, 2001). The importance of a policy cannot be stressed enough for the issue of violence and victimization among Aboriginal people in light of the overwhelming amount of research showing their disproportionate involvement in violence across multiple contexts. In accordance with the existing literature, we also found a disparity between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer

victimization. Aboriginal children and youths were consistently more often involved in this form of peer abuse than non Aboriginal children and youths. It is therefore imperative that support and services be in place to address Aboriginal children's and youths' safety and well being at school.

As reviewed earlier, there is a lack of Aboriginal-specific violence policies at the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government (e.g., Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2010b; Public Safety Canada, 2009). Within the institution of education, the bullying policy provides school board administrators with a framework for making decisions on prevention and intervention strategies. The policy does acknowledge the diversity of the students who attend Ontario schools by stating that prevention and intervention efforts should be culturally sensitive; however, the majority of the school boards have not identified specific groups of students who would benefit from specialized programs. Following from the results of the study, we propose that school boards revisit their policies on bullying and consider Aboriginal children and youths as one of the special groups of students for which prevention and intervention strategies should focus. Drawing from the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework, we put forth several recommendations for policy change in terms of more awareness, training, and education on Aboriginal cultures as well as providing Aboriginal-based programs and services to support the children's and youths' needs.

School administrators, educators, school personnel working directly with the Aboriginal population should be trained on Aboriginal cultures and perspectives in order to understand their unique challenges. Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 144, Bullying Prevention and Intervention (2009) already includes a guideline for training administrators and educators on sensitivity to diversity but we urge policy makers to specify Aboriginal cultures and traditions as

a key topic in the training. As our results suggest, it is no longer sufficient to implement a general bullying prevention/intervention program; school boards need to consider prevention programs that are relevant for Aboriginal students. For example, The Fourth R is a promising school-based program that tap into Aboriginal youth empowerment to raise awareness for violence prevention (Crooks, Chiodo, & Thomas, 2009). The program consists of classroom materials that are curriculum-appropriate for Aboriginal people, a peer mentoring program for older and younger Aboriginal children and youths, a leadership course that builds relationship skills and promotes cultural connectedness, and a transition conference for Aboriginal students entering high school.

We further recommend that the support services that are provided to Aboriginal students who bully others, are bullied by others, or are affected by bullying should also be relevant to their cultural perspective. Indeed, the School Community Safety Advisory Panel (2008) recommended that for Aboriginal students, effective counselling and outreach are necessary components for violence prevention and intervention. Researchers have also recommended restorative justice practices as an alternative to the punitive approach towards bullying, violence, and other problematic behaviours since it is culturally relevant to Aboriginal cultures as well as other ethnic minority groups (Morrison, 2006). Restorative practice is an Aboriginal-based healing process whereby individuals who are involved in the incident are given the opportunity to understand the impact of their behaviours on others. The approach is less punitive for the individuals involved while focusing on correcting for the negative behaviours. Therefore, we recommend policy makers integrate restorative approaches to their bullying prevention and intervention programs since it is not only helpful for Aboriginal children but it is also ideal to strengthen all peer relationships that have been disrupted by troubled behaviours such as bullying

(Pepler, 2006). If schools do not have in house services for Aboriginal students, they need to reach out to the Aboriginal community for specialized support provided by the Aboriginal community for its people.

Although we highly recommend that changes be made at the policy level in order to systematically address the needs of Aboriginal children and youths, the results of our study also have implications for school principals and educators working directly with this population of students. There are some Aboriginal specific violence/bullying programs that individual schools or classrooms can adopt to meet the needs of their students, one of which was mentioned earlier. Individual schools or classrooms can also choose to adopt a restorative approach to resolving conflicts and incidences of bullying that occurs. Finally, if schools do not have appropriate services for Aboriginal children, it would be helpful for administrators and educators to be knowledgeable on community resources and services provided especially for Aboriginal children and youths on the issue of violence/ bullying prevention and intervention.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

#### **Strengths**

The study was the first in Canada to compare Aboriginal, Caucasian, and ethnic minority children's and youths' experiences of different forms of bullying and peer victimization utilizing a widely accepted definition of bullying. A standard definition of bullying helped increased the likelihood that all participants were reporting on the same kinds of behaviours. We included several measures of bullying and peer victimization because the general bullying and peer victimization questions have been found to be less helpful in identifying cases of bullying compared to questions asking children to report on their involvement of specific forms of bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2010). In the present study, the inclusion of more than one measure

of bullying and peer victimization allowed us to detect ethnic and sex differences for overall bullying as well as specific forms of bullying. We consistently found that Aboriginal children and youths are more frequently involved across all forms of bullying, suggesting that the problem of bullying is a concern for this group of Canadian children and youths. Another strength of the study is that we differentiated Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences by sex since it has been shown from both the violence and bullying literature that boys and girls are involved in aggression and violence differently across the life span. The results of the study revealed that while boys are more frequently involved in physical bullying, Aboriginal boys are especially involved compared to their non Aboriginal, same-sex peers.

### **Limitations**

Although the present study made an important initial contribution in the area of Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in bullying in a Canadian context, some limitations of the study must be noted. We have found statistically significant ethnic differences for bullying involvement in the present study; however, the effect sizes that were obtained from the multivariate and univariate tests are considered small (see Cohen, 1988; Vaske, Gliner, & Morgan, 2002). This may be an indication that there are factors not included in our study that would help to better explain the relationship between bullying and ethnicity. For example, school contextual factors are promising variables that have been shown to play a role in ethnic differences in bullying involvement. The small sample of Aboriginal children and youths ( $n=175$ ) compared to the ethnic majority and minority sample sizes may have also reduced the power of the statistical analyses even though we have made every effort to correct for the unequal sample sizes. Further, the small number of Aboriginal children and youths in the final sample makes it difficult to generalize the results of the study to all Aboriginal students in

Canada. To ensure statistically stronger results and those that are more representative of Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying and peer victimization, a larger and more comparable sample of Aboriginal and non Aboriginal children and youths are needed.

In the study, we used self reports of bullying which is one of the most common methods of assessing bullying involvement (Vaillancourt et al., 2010b). Still, this method is not without its limitations. Children may under report their involvement in bullying for several reasons; to seem more socially desirable to researchers and adults, or in fear that their situation will worsen if adults are involved (Card & Hodges, 2008). Self reports are also about the children's perceptions of their involvement in bullying, which may not reflect the truth of the matter. For example, discrepancies in self and peer reports of bullying have been reported by Perry, Kusel, and Perry (1988). These researchers found that a small subgroup of children identified themselves as extremely victimized while they were not perceived as such by their peers. Arguably, peer reports have an advantage over self report in that this method of assessment combines bullying scores from multiple perspectives, thus providing a more reliable assessment of children's involvement in bullying (Cornell & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Peers are also privy to information that may not be available to the individual, such as when children are targets of relational victimization (i.e., gossip) (Card & Hodges, 2008). While the use of peer reports is valuable, it is not a practical consideration for population-based studies because we would require that all children consent to participate in the study. The scoring of peer reports prove to be time consuming and tedious (Card & Hodges, 2008), especially if the study consists of a large sample of participants.

Another limitation of the study is in the children's abilities to accurately report their ethnicity. Although research has established that children as young as five years of age are able

to differentiate themselves from others based on physical features, such as skin colour (e.g., Aboud, 1988), it is not well established how accurate children are in identifying which ethnic group(s) they belong to. However, a recent study suggests that children at ten years of age can be reliable reporters of their own ethnicity; the researchers found that a high percentage of children (84.2%) were able to accurately identify their ethnic background (Vitoroulis, Vaillancourt, McDougall, Brittain & Krygsman, 2011). A related concern that may have affected the results of the study is that there is a paucity of research examining how accurate children are in detecting the ethnicity of *other* children since this can influence how they treat their peers. For example, an Aboriginal child who is perceived to be Aboriginal by their peers may be treated differently than an Aboriginal child who is not perceived to be Aboriginal by their peers. In the present study, we do not have the means to verify whether a child of a certain ethnic group is accurately perceived by their peers to be from that same group.

The participants in our study were recruited from a large school district in an urban setting, so the results may not reflect the experiences of children and youths living on reserve or in rural areas. Since research has confirmed that Aboriginal children and youths living on and off reserve differ on several measures of social and academic adjustments, it is important to replicate the present study in the aforementioned geographical locations. Lastly, the nature of the study is cross-sectional so causal inferences cannot be made. Accordingly, longitudinal studies are necessary to identify the mechanisms in which these behaviours emerge for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and youths.

### **Future Directions**

We have already alluded to the potential research benefits of including other contextual variables when examining the relationship between bullying and ethnicity. Ethnic diversity is a

salient aspect of Canadian society so it would make sense for future studies to determine whether classroom, school and/or community ethnic composition would differentially impact ethnic minority and majority children's and youths' involvement in bullying. Research have also shown that personal and family variables may also moderate the relationship between bullying and ethnicity (see Card, Isaacs, & Hodges, 2007). For Aboriginal people, drug and alcohol abuse, exposure to family violence, and poverty are closely linked to their involvement with violence (Perreault, 2011). It would be fruitful for future studies to examine whether these factors would moderate Aboriginal children's and youths' involvement in bullying.

Alternatively, future studies could take on a resiliency perspective and look into protective factors for Aboriginal children and youths. Some factors that have the potential to moderate their involvement in bullying are a sense of social support from parents, teachers, or peers and the presence of positive role models in their lives (see Canadian Council on Social Development & Family Service Canada, 2003; Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Finally, our findings suggest that Aboriginal children and youths are more involved in bullying but we do not know why they become involved in bullying. It is possible that they bully others to gain power but it is equally likely that they bully others in response to being bullied. Furthermore, we do not know whether the nature of the bullying is intra-ethnic or inter-ethnic. To further enhance our understanding of Aboriginal children's and youths' experiences of bullying, future studies can employ a qualitative or mixed methods design to complement the quantitative results of the present study. Finally, there are many different pathways that lead to bullying involvement (Pepler & Craig, 2000) so a longitudinal design would be valuable in determining the bullying and peer victimization trajectories for Aboriginal children and youths.

### **Conclusion**

When integrating the findings of the present study, we found support for bullying being a concern for Aboriginal children and youths, although more research (both quantitative and qualitative) is needed to further understand the nature of bullying for these children and youths. Their involvement in bullying may be a result of or reaction to the historical and social inequities not experienced by other ethnic majority and minority groups in Canada. Consequently, policies aimed at reducing bullying involvement among Aboriginal children and youths should address the challenges that are unique to this group of students; their specific needs must also be considered in the development and implementation of bullying prevention and intervention strategies. At the school or classroom level, administrators and educators working with this population of students can also adopt an Aboriginal-specific violence prevention program and counselling service to protect and support this vulnerable group of Canadian children and youths.

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Table 1

## Intercorrelations for Different Forms of Bullying and Peer Victimization

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. General victimization	—							
2. General bullying	.316**	—						
3. Physical victimization	.511**	.264**	—					
4. Verbal victimization	.659**	.303**	.530**	—				
5. Social victimization	.524**	.225**	.402**	.550**	—			
6. Physical bullying	.242**	.493**	.384**	.285**	.216**	—		
7. Verbal bullying	.270**	.580**	.272**	.365**	.251**	.524**	—	
8. Social bullying	.203**	.420**	.201**	.254**	.285**	.395**	.528**	—

\*\* p &lt; .01

Table 2

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of General Bullying and Peer Victimization as a Function of Ethnicity

Group	Bullying				Peer Victimization			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Aboriginal	1.94	1.22	1.94	0.07	1.97	1.27	1.97	0.08
White	1.56	0.87	1.56	0.01	1.81	1.08	1.80	0.01
Ethnic Minority	1.50	0.85	1.49	0.02	1.62	0.98	1.63	0.02

Table 3

Boys' Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Physical Victimization as a Function of Ethnicity

Group	Peer Victimization			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Aboriginal	1.94	1.28	1.96	0.10
White	1.64	0.99	1.64	0.02
Ethnic Minority	1.49	0.83	1.50	0.03

Table 4

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of Physical Bullying as a Function of Ethnicity

Group	Bullying			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Aboriginal	1.54	0.99	1.54	0.05
White	1.29	0.67	1.29	0.01
Ethnic Minority	1.28	0.65	1.28	0.02

Table 5

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of Physical Bullying as a Function of Sex

Group	Bullying			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Boys	1.39	0.77	1.39	0.01
Girls	1.20	0.55	1.20	0.01

Table 6

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of Verbal Bullying and Peer Victimization as a Function of Ethnicity

Group	Bullying				Peer Victimization			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Aboriginal	2.01	1.19	2.01	0.07	2.34	1.41	2.35	0.09
White	1.65	0.91	1.65	0.01	2.10	1.20	2.01	0.01
Ethnic Minority	1.57	0.85	1.57	0.02	1.93	1.12	1.94	0.03

Table 7

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of Social Bullying and Peer Victimization as a Function of Ethnicity

Group	Bullying				Peer Victimization			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Aboriginal	1.77	1.10	1.76	0.06	1.96	1.22	1.96	0.08
White	1.49	0.79	1.50	0.01	1.76	1.01	1.76	0.01
Ethnic Minority	1.45	0.78	1.45	0.02	1.64	0.97	1.65	0.02

Table 8

Mean Scores, Adjusted Means, Standard Deviations, and Standard Errors for Measures of Social Bullying and Peer Victimization as a Function of Sex

Group	Bullying				Peer Victimization			
	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE	M	SD	Adjusted M	SE
Boys	1.41	0.78	1.49	0.03	1.60	0.98	1.67	0.04
Girls	1.57	0.80	1.65	0.03	1.87	1.02	1.90	0.04

## Appendix

## Scan of the Ontario School Board's Bullying Prevention/ Intervention Policies

School Board	Are special needs groups identified with regards to prevention and intervention efforts?
1. Upper Grand District School Board	No
2. Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board	No
3. Toronto District School Board	No
4. Peel District School Board	No
5. Waterloo Region District School Board	No
6. Thames Valley District School Board	No
7. Halton District School Board	No
8. Bluewater District School Board	No
9. District School Board Ontario North East	No.
10. Lambton Kent District School Board	No
11. Ottawa-Carleton District School Board	No
12. Rainbow District School Board	No
13. Simcoe County District School Board	No
14. Superior-Greenstone District School Board	No
15. Upper Canada District School Board	No
16. Algoma District School Board	Yes. For students with special needs, support, intervention or consequences must be consistent with their strengths and needs in the student's Individual Education Plan.

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17. Keewatin-Patricia District School Board	Yes. For students with special needs, support, intervention or consequences must be consistent with their strengths and needs in the student's Individual Education Plan.
18. District School Board of Niagara	Yes. For students with special needs, support, intervention or consequences must be consistent with their strengths and needs in the student's Individual Education Plan.
19. Lakehead District School Board	Yes. Racialized students and those with exceptionalities.
20. Grand Erie District School Board	Yes. Support for ESL, Special Education, Native populations.
21. Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board	No.
22. Limestone District School Board	No.
23. Renfrew County District School Board	No
24. Greater Essex County District School Board	No

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