

# The facts about workplace bullying

When you hear the word “bully,” an image almost certainly pops into your head.

Whether it’s a cinematic version of the classic schoolyard bully torturing his preteen peers, the popular kid in high school who tortured you about a bad hair day in the fifth grade or a hulking senior who made you and your lunch money his personal ATM on a near daily basis, the image of a bully is almost universal in our society.

It is also mostly associated with adolescence — like the examples above or the very real issue of cyberbullying — and many would like us to think it’s not something we’ll have to deal with once we escape high school. However, as many folks know, nothing could be further from the truth. Bullying takes place at every level of society and the workplace is no different.

## What Is a Workplace Bully?

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, workplace bullying is the repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct such as:

- Threats, humiliation or intimidation
- Work interference/sabotage that prevents work from getting done
- Verbal abuse

If the above statements apply to your normal workday, then you are probably either watching workplace bullying happen or having it happen to you. Some may say, “Yeah, I’m sure it happens some places or to a few people here and there, but it’s not that big of an issue, right?” Wrong.

A 2014 survey by the WBI revealed that 27 percent of workers had direct experience with bullying at the workplace and 72 percent of workers were aware of workplace bullying happening in their worksites. However, disturbingly, 72 percent of employers denied, discounted, encouraged, rationalized or defended workplace bullying.

Lastly, 47 percent of workers said they were negatively affected by bullying, either as the victim or a witness. When one looks at these numbers, it’s hard to argue that this country doesn’t have a problem with worksite bullying.



## Who Is the Workplace Bully and Who Is the Target?

We know what workplace bullying is and that it’s a big problem. What we don’t know is who is doing it. Again, our friends at the WBI provide some insight. The majority of workplace bullying comes directly from bosses — 56 percent, in fact. (Only 11 percent of bullying is directed from workers to bosses.) That leaves us with a third of bullying happening from peer to peer. This is a somewhat flawed number, as it does not account for the social hierarchies of the workplace; for example, a nurse bullying a CNA would be considered peer-to-peer bullying, even though a nurse typically has more power in the workplace than a CNA. One thing to remember about workplace bullying is that individuals across class lines may take part in it, but the culture of a workplace is always set by the bosses, not the workers.

The WBI’s research also shows that workplace bullies tend to be men far more than women (69 percent compared to 31 percent). A lot of societal and cultural factors account for this number. The one that is easiest to understand is that more men hold positions of power in worksites than women. This matters, because if you hold a position of power over someone, you are more likely to exploit it.

While the majority of bullies are men, the majority of victims are women. Women are 50 percent more likely to be targeted by workplace bullying than men. Again, there are a lot of reasons why this may be the case. For one, men typically do not report bullying at the same rate as women and instead use a “tough-it-

out” approach. Additionally, if you break the numbers down along racial/ethnic lines, the impact of bullying on people of color is sadly higher than it is on their white co-workers.

By now you must surely be thinking, “Why don’t people just report it, or get a lawyer and sue?” That’s a great question. The reason is that 80 percent of workplace bullying is not illegal. Only bullying related to protected classes is illegal. So, for example, if your manager bullies you about being gay or for having a disability, you can seek some legal protections; if s/he bullies you just

because they saw you as an easy target, no law has your back.

Workplace bullying is real; in fact, it’s an epidemic problem in this country.

However, there are people and systems that see a short-term benefit to its prevalence. What benefit is that? Well, it’s all about power and control. If you want to know more about workplace bullying or the data mentioned in this article, visit the Workplace Bullying Institute at [www.workplacebullying.org](http://www.workplacebullying.org)