

Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Impact of Bullying in Boarding School Environments: A Systematic Review

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Abstract. *Bullying in boarding schools is a serious issue affecting students' mental health, social relationships, and academic performance. Boarding schools, especially pesantren in Indonesia, present unique social and institutional contexts that may facilitate bullying. This study conducted a systematic review following PRISMA guidelines. Literature searches were performed in Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed, ProQuest, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2020 and 2025. Eligible articles focused on bullying in boarding schools and reported data on prevalence, risk factors, or impacts. Data were synthesized narratively. Bullying is common in boarding schools, including physical, verbal, and relational forms. Key risk factors include low self-esteem, limited resilience, negative parenting styles, unsafe school environments, and peer hierarchies. Bullying was associated with psychological distress, anxiety, depression, peer conflicts, reduced school engagement, and lower academic performance. Prevalence and severity varied across cultural and institutional contexts. Bullying in boarding schools is multifactorial, involving individual, familial, and school-level contributors. Unsafe climates and poor supervision intensify risks, while negative consequences extend beyond immediate harm to long-term mental health, social adjustment, and academic outcomes.*

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying is acknowledged as a major concern in educational environments worldwide, as it adversely affects students' psychological well-being, learning achievement, and social adjustment. The World Health Organization defines bullying as deliberate and repeated aggressive behavior that occurs in the context of power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim (World Health Organization, 2024). The issue tends to become more pronounced in boarding schools, where students spend extended periods living together with limited parental oversight. Although these schools are designed to instill discipline, independence, and moral values, they may also unintentionally provide circumstances that allow bullying to emerge more frequently and intensely (Liu et al., 2025).

Research evidence indicates that bullying is generally more prevalent in boarding schools compared to day schools, primarily due to the unique structural and social dynamics within residential settings (Doyle & O'Brien, 2025). Factors that contribute to this problem include rigid institutional regulations, hierarchical peer structures, and the lack of parental involvement, which together enable bullying practices to persist (Fauzan & Sulaeman, 2024; Adewuyi, 2023; Rasyid and Baharuddin, 2025). Additional determinants such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, peer influence, and psychosocial vulnerabilities have also been associated with both the onset and continuation of bullying incidents (McCabe & Strauss, 2022).

The consequences of bullying within residential education are extensive. Victims often experience mental health problems including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and in severe cases, suicidal ideation (Chang et al., 2023). Furthermore, bullying is linked to decreased academic engagement, weaker attachment to school, and an elevated risk of dropping out (Liu et al., 2025). Despite these significant outcomes, existing studies have not sufficiently synthesized findings on prevalence, risk factors, and impacts specifically within boarding schools. Much of the current literature continues to focus on regular schools, leaving the vulnerabilities of boarding students less examined.

In the Indonesian context, this challenge is particularly relevant in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). A study in Padang Panjang revealed that 50.2% of santri reported moderate levels of bullying, with verbal forms being the most common at 61.8% (Rizki & Yasmin, 2023). Research at another place also found that while overall prevalence was relatively low, 64% of students still experienced moderate-level verbal bullying (Rayhan et al., 2023). Qualitative findings from Jember further indicated that bullying often manifests in physical, verbal, and social forms, with senior students commonly targeting juniors, leaving victims distressed, fearful, and anxious (Daley et al., 2023). These studies highlight that bullying in Indonesian boarding school is both widespread and consistent with global patterns, although influenced by specific cultural and institutional settings.

Given these circumstances, a systematic review is essential to establish a more comprehensive understanding of bullying in boarding schools. By consolidating evidence on prevalence, associated risk factors, and related consequences, this review aims to bridge existing gaps in knowledge, emphasize

the seriousness of the issue, and contribute to the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies tailored to the boarding school environment.

The purpose of this study is to systematically review the literature on bullying in pesantren by analyzing its prevalence, identifying contributing risk factors, and examining its psychological, social, and academic effects. The study seeks to provide a holistic perspective on the phenomenon and offer evidence-based recommendations to support the design of effective preventive and intervention programs.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study was conducted through a systematic review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The literature search involved three main steps: (1) identifying relevant keywords such as “bullying,” “boarding school,” “Islamic boarding school,” “risk factors,” and “impacts”; (2) retrieving articles from databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, PubMed, ProQuest, Web of Science, and Google Scholar; and (3) limiting publications to the last five years (2020–2025) to ensure up-to-date findings. Articles were screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible studies included research on bullying in boarding schools, published in English or Indonesian, accessible in full text, and employing either quantitative or qualitative designs. Excluded were editorials, opinion papers, incomplete proceedings, and studies not focusing on bullying prevalence, risk factors, or impacts. The selection process followed four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Data extraction captured author, year, study design, setting, sample size, and key outcomes. A narrative synthesis was then applied to compare and group the findings according to the research focus. As this review relied solely on published studies, no direct involvement of human participants was required.

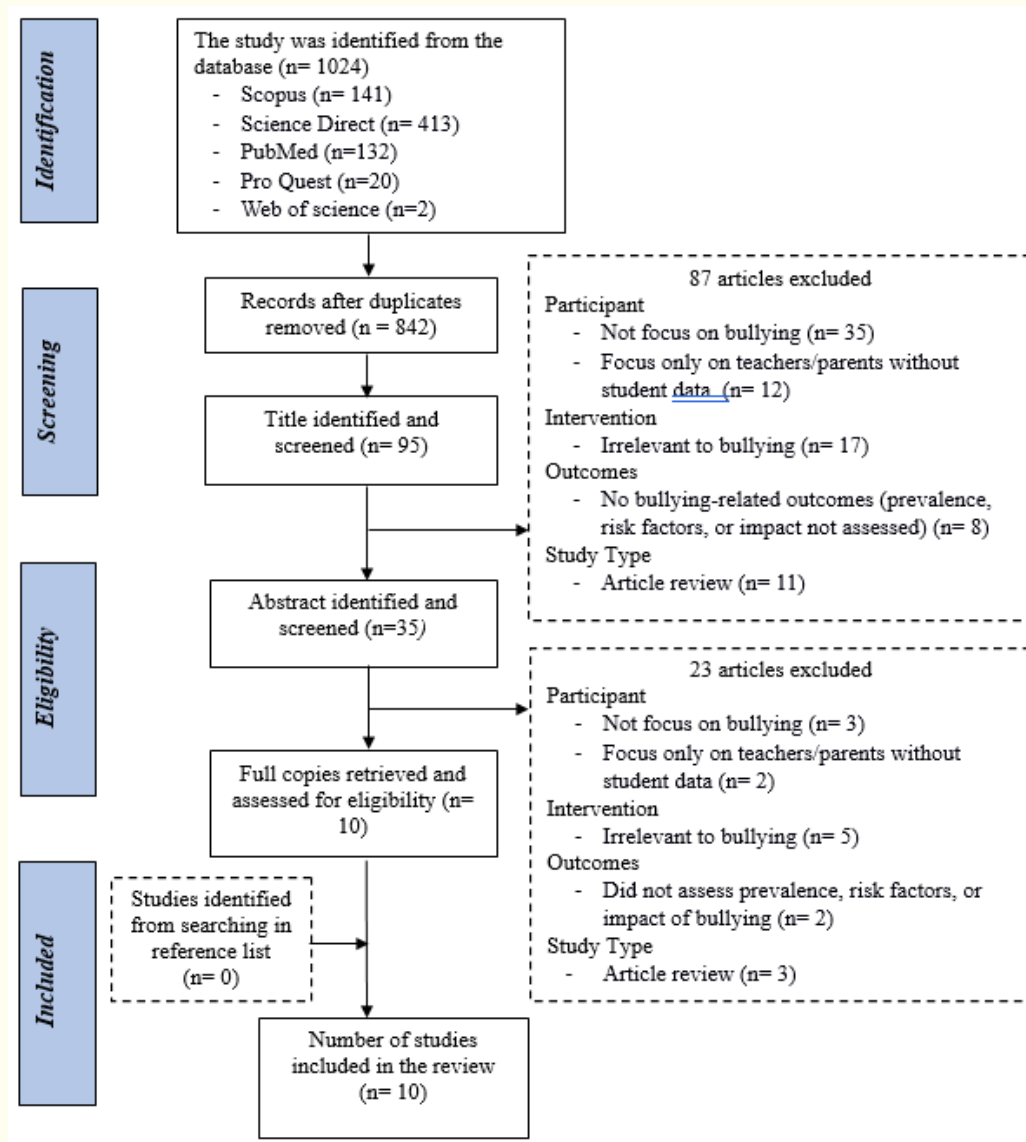


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram of Literature Search

RESULTS

Table 1. Analysis Journal

No	Title, Author, Years	Research Design	Sample	Variable	Result
1	Bullying victimization and mental health problems of boarding adolescents in rural China: the role of self-esteem and	Cross-sectional	Boarding adolescents (n=2.155)	Bullying victimization, mental health, self-esteem, parenting styles	Bullying strongly associated with poor mental health; self-esteem mediated and parenting style moderated the effect.

No	Title, Author, Years	Research Design	Sample	Variable	Result
	parenting styles (Chen et al., 2025)				
2	The impact of school bullying on the mental health of boarding secondary school students: mediating roles of school belongingness and resilience (Liu et al., 2025)	Cross-sectional	Boarding secondary students (n=1.560)	Bullying, mental health, belongingness, resilience	Bullying negatively affected mental health; belongingness and resilience partially mediated.
3	Gambaran Bullying pada Remaja di Boarding School Kota Banda Aceh (Ahad et al., 2024)	Cross-sectional	Boarding adolescents (n=236)	Bullying scale (39-item questionnaire)	Low bullying prevalence—98.7% did not experience bullying; only 1.3% reported high-level bullying
4	Bullying from Health, Law, and Psychology Perspective (Case Study of Students in Islamic Boarding Schools in Jambi City) (Evy et al., 2024)	Cross-sectional	Students from three Islamic boarding schools in Jambi City, Indonesia (n=156)	Bullying (frequency), mental health, emotional intelligence	Correlation found between bullying and mental health; no correlation between bullying and emotional intelligence
5	The impact of bullying cognition on school bullying among Chinese adolescents (Fei et al., 2024)	Cross-sectional	School adolescents (n=5.903)	Bullying cognition, resilience, perpetration/victimization	Stronger anti-bullying cognition reduced bullying; resilience mediated, sex moderated.
6	Current situation and factors influencing bullying in junior high schools (Li et al., 2024)	Cross-sectional	Junior high school students (n=1.200)	Bullying prevalence, school environment, risk factors	High prevalence reported; most occurred in unsupervised areas; school-level risks identified.
7	Prevalence and determinants of school bullying in Qatar: a cross-sectional study (Kamal et al., 2023)	Cross-sectional	Students from 10 schools in Qatar (n=980)	Bullying prevalence, location, types, sociodemographic factors	Victimization 41%, perpetration 31.7%; classrooms and hallways were most common bullying sites; verbal bullying most frequent; demographic

No	Title, Author, Years	Research Design	Sample	Variable	Result
					factors (age, gender, ethnicity) showed significant differences
8	Boarding students' perceptions of school climate and well-being across gender and sexual orientation (Fredrick et al., 2022)	Cross-sectional	Boarding students (n=309)	School climate, well-being, gender/sexual orientation	Poor climate associated with more conduct/peer problems; subgroup differences observed.
9	Perceptions of emotional and physical safety among boarding students and associations with school bullying (Fredrick et al., 2021)	Cross-sectional	Boarding students (n=358)	Perceived school safety, bullying exposure	Lower perceived safety linked to higher bullying and worse socio-emotional outcomes.
10	Study on Bullying Status of Rural Boarding Students on Campus Taking X Middle School as an Example (Gong et al., 2021)	Cross-sectional	Rural boarding middle school students (n=286)	Bullying status (Olweus questionnaire), correlates via logistics and Spearman's rank analysis	Provides prevalence data and identifies factors associated with bullying severity and frequency

DISCUSSION

1. Prevalence of Bullying in Boarding Schools

The occurrence of bullying in boarding schools continues to be recognized as a serious issue, although the reported prevalence varies considerably across different studies and settings. Research conducted in rural China found that bullying among students living in dormitories is still common, strongly associated with negative mental health outcomes, and shaped by factors such as parental roles and self-esteem (Chen et al., 2025). Likewise, evidence from junior high schools indicates that bullying often takes place in areas with limited supervision, stressing the importance of institutional oversight and preventive interventions (Li et al., 2024).

Findings from international contexts reinforce this perspective. A study in Qatar revealed that verbal bullying was the most dominant type, with patterns of victimization differing according to demographic characteristics like age and gender (Kamal et al., 2023). In India, similar research

demonstrated that bullying is closely linked to psychological distress and maladaptive behaviors among students (Patel et al., 2020). By contrast, some investigations in Indonesia reported relatively low levels of bullying within certain boarding schools, suggesting that cultural factors, school atmosphere, and policy implementation may influence its prevalence (Rayhan et al., 2023)

Smaller studies in Indonesia have nonetheless shown that bullying still occurs in diverse forms physical, verbal, and relational often driven by seniority hierarchies and weak enforcement of disciplinary systems (Kamal et al., 2023). Such variations highlight that although bullying is widespread in boarding schools, its prevalence is influenced by assessment methods, cultural norms, and institutional practices (Arahman, 2025; Ramli et al., 2024; Rijal, 2025).

In conclusion, the body of literature consistently identifies bullying in boarding school contexts as a global problem, with significant consequences for students' psychological well-being and the overall learning environment. The variability in prevalence across countries emphasizes the urgency of developing standardized tools and culturally responsive strategies to effectively address bullying in these educational institutions.

2. Risk Factors of Bullying

Bullying in boarding schools is shaped by multiple interrelated determinants at the personal, family, institutional, and socio-environmental levels (McVittie & Ansloos, 2025; Xavier et al., 2025; Sony et al., 2025). At the individual level, evidence suggests that students with low self-esteem and poor resilience are more susceptible to bullying experiences. Conversely, strong coping skills and a positive self-concept reduce the likelihood of involvement, either as perpetrators or victims (Fei et al., 2024). Studies in rural China further indicate that self-esteem acts as a key mediator, linking bullying victimization with poor mental health outcomes, thereby underscoring its critical role in adolescents' vulnerability (Chen et al., 2025).

Family dynamics also play a pivotal role. Adolescents exposed to harsh or inconsistent parenting practices tend to show higher susceptibility to bullying, while supportive parental involvement is associated with improved psychological well-being even among those who experience victimization (Fei et al., 2024).

Within the school context, insufficient supervision, negative school climate, and peer group pressures frequently emerge as risk factors. Research in Chinese boarding schools highlights that unsupervised areas often serve as hotspots for bullying (Li et al., 2024). Gong et al (2021) similarly reported that limited teacher monitoring correlates with higher rates of bullying incidents. In Indonesia, (Rayhan et al., 2023) found that seniority hierarchies, weak disciplinary enforcement, and the absence of clear regulations perpetuate bullying practices. Moreover, unsafe school environments and lack of belonging have been strongly associated with bullying exposure and poor student well-being (Fredrick et al., 2021).

Sociodemographic characteristics also influence bullying patterns. Studies in Qatar revealed that age, gender, and ethnicity contribute to variations in both victimization and perpetration (Kamal et

al., 2023). In Indonesia, Rizki & Yasmin (2023) reported that bullying in Islamic boarding schools was significantly linked with students' mental health status, reflecting how cultural and contextual factors shape risk profiles.

Taking together, the evidence demonstrates that bullying risk factors in boarding schools are multidimensional, extending beyond individual vulnerabilities to include family influences, school structures, and sociocultural contexts. Effective prevention thus requires a holistic approach involving students, parents, educators, and institutional policies.

3. Impact of Bullying

The consequences of bullying in boarding schools extend across psychological, social, and academic domains. Psychologically, bullying has been consistently linked to heightened risks of depression, anxiety, and emotional distress. A study in China showed that victimized adolescents reported poorer mental health outcomes, with self-esteem serving as a mediator and parenting style functioning as a moderator (Li et al., 2024). Similar findings revealed that bullying experiences among boarding students were associated with reduced well-being and greater socio-emotional challenges (Fredrick et al., 2022). Research in India likewise indicated that bullying exposure contributes to significant anxiety symptoms and behavioral issues (Patel et al., 2020)

On a social level, bullying disrupts peer relationships, diminishes students' sense of belonging, and fosters negative school climates. Boarding students who perceived their school as unsafe were more likely to experience peer conflicts and conduct-related problems (Gong et al., 2021). In Indonesia, bullying within Islamic boarding schools was found to correlate with poor mental health and difficulties in social adjustment, although no significant relationship was established with emotional intelligence, (Rizki & Yasmin, 2023).

Academically, bullying undermines learning engagement and motivation. Victimized students often struggle to participate in class activities, maintain focus, and achieve optimal academic performance. In summary, the impacts of bullying in boarding schools go far beyond immediate harm. They encompass long-term psychological difficulties, social dysfunction, and academic decline. Addressing these consequences requires comprehensive and context-sensitive prevention and intervention strategies tailored to boarding school environments.

The findings of this study contribute to a broader theoretical understanding of the prevalence, risk factors, and impacts of bullying within boarding school environments. This synthesis provides an essential conceptual foundation for the formulation of future prevention and intervention strategies. Nevertheless, the study does not demonstrate a direct impact on the implementation of bullying prevention measures as outlined in the background section. The scope of this review remains limited to secondary data synthesis without empirical validation, policy evaluation, or the application of intervention programs in real settings. Consequently, the contribution of this work is primarily

theoretical and informative rather than practical or policy oriented. The study effectively maps the complexity of bullying phenomena in boarding school contexts but stops short of translating this understanding into actionable frameworks. Future research is recommended to advance toward applied investigations, particularly through the development and empirical testing of culturally contextualized anti-bullying programs, teacher and caregiver capacity-building initiatives, and the integration of school-wide approaches that foster supportive, inclusive, and non-violent educational environments.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature reviewed, bullying in boarding school environments remains a widespread and multifaceted issue. The prevalence of bullying varies across different countries and school contexts, but most studies indicate that a significant proportion of students' experience bullying in its various forms, including physical, verbal, and relational. Risk factors for bullying are complex, encompassing individual characteristics such as low self-esteem and limited resilience, family influences such as parenting style, school-related factors including unsafe school climates and poor supervision, and broader socio-demographic elements. The consequences of bullying are profound, affecting students' psychological well-being, social relationships, and academic engagement. Victimized students are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, peer conflicts, and reduced motivation to participate in school activities, which can negatively influence overall academic performance. Given these findings, it is recommended that future research explore interventions specifically tailored to the boarding school context, focusing on multi-level strategies that address individual coping skills, parental involvement, and school climate. Longitudinal studies are also encouraged to examine the long-term effects of bullying and the effectiveness of preventive measures. Furthermore, research comparing different cultural and regional boarding school settings could provide deeper insights into context-specific risk factors and protective strategies.

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