

BULLYING IN THE SPECIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM: A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of bullying from the perspective of the vulnerability of beneficiaries of the special protection system, highlighting the risks to which they are exposed. The study is theoretical in nature and is based on an evaluation of the specialized literature, current legislation, and statistical data provided by the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children, and Adoption (ANDPCA) for the period 2022–2024. The concepts of bullying and protection systems have been clearly defined, and the sources used include specialized books, academic articles, and relevant normative documents that are up-to-date and appropriate for the topic studied. The analysis reveals a significant correlation between being a beneficiary of a protection measure and the risk of experiencing bullying behaviour. The paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon among beneficiaries of the protection system.

Keywords: bullying, abuse, resilience, beneficiary of the protection system

Résumé : Ce travail examine le phénomène du harcèlement (bullying) du point de vue de la vulnérabilité des bénéficiaires du système de protection spéciale, en mettant en évidence les risques auxquels ils sont exposés. L'étude est de nature théorique et s'appuie sur une évaluation de la littérature spécialisée, de la législation en vigueur et des données statistiques fournies par l'Autorité Nationale pour les Droits des Personnes Handicapées, de l'Enfant et de l'Adoption (ANDPCA) pour la période 2022–2024. Les concepts de harcèlement et de système de protection ont été clairement définis, et les sources utilisées comprennent des ouvrages spécialisés, des articles académiques et des documents normatifs pertinents, actualisés et adaptés au sujet étudié. L'analyse met en évidence une corrélation significative entre le statut de bénéficiaire d'une mesure de protection et le risque de devenir victime de comportements de harcèlement. Ce travail vise à offrir une compréhension plus approfondie de la complexité de ce phénomène chez les bénéficiaires du système de protection.

Mots clés : harcèlement, abus, résilience, bénéficiaire du système de protection

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Rezumat: Această lucrare examinează fenomenul de bullying din perspectiva vulnerabilității beneficiarilor sistemului de protecție specială, evidențiind riscurile la care aceștia sunt expoși. Studiul are un caracter teoretic și se bazează pe o evaluare a literaturii de specialitate, a legislației în vigoare și a datelor statistice furnizate de Autoritatea Națională pentru Drepturile Persoanelor cu Dizabilități, Copilului și Adopții (ANDPCA) pentru perioada 2022-2024. Conceptul de bullying și cel de sistem de protecție au fost clar definite, iar sursele utilizate includ cărți de specialitate, articole academice și acte normative relevante, actuale și corespunzătoare temei studiate. Analiza evidențiază o corelație semnificativă între statutul de beneficiar al unei măsuri de protecție și riscul de a deveni victimă a comportamentului de bullying. Lucrarea urmărește să ofere o înțelegere mai aprofundată a complexității acestui fenomen în rândul beneficiarilor sistemului de protecție.

Cuvinte cheie: bullying, abuz, reziliență, beneficiar al sistemului de protecție

1. Conceptual Delimitations

In contemporary times, the phenomenon of bullying has been approached from multiple perspectives. Some of these have been formulated by specialists whose field of study is human beings, while others have been developed by ordinary social actors within the community. I believe that studying the phenomenon of bullying in relation to the beneficiaries of the protection system is relevant, as they are more likely to become victims of this behaviour.

In order to define the term bullying, I consider it imperative to first present the definition given by the legislator and to state the perspective of specialists. According to Law No. 221 of November 18, 2019, „bullying is an action or series of physical, verbal, relational, and/or cyber actions, in a social context that is difficult to avoid, committed intentionally, involving an imbalance of power, resulting in the violation of dignity or the creation of an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive atmosphere, directed against a person or group of persons and targeting aspects of discrimination and social exclusion” (Art. 66).

This definition is also found in the *National Education Law No. 1* of 2011, republished, and the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, electronic version, confirms the use of this legislative definition for the term „bullying”.

Furthermore, the law on pre-university education specifies that bullying may be linked to „race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, or disadvantaged status, or to beliefs, gender or sexual orientation, personal characteristics, and which takes place in pre-university educational institutions and in all spaces intended for education and vocational training” (Law No. 198 of July 4, 2023).

Thus, Romanian legislation recognizes bullying as a complex phenomenon that affects the dignity and safety of children in various social environments through deliberate and repetitive actions, impacting different social and personal categories.

Specialists interested in this phenomenon complete the picture outlined by legislation, arguing that bullying has three main characteristics: „it is intentional—the aggressor intends to hurt someone; it is repetitive—the same person is hurt

repeatedly; it manifests itself through an imbalance of power – the aggressor chooses their victim, who is usually vulnerable, weak, and unable to defend themselves" (Swearer & Hymel, 2015, apud Bîtca, 2024, p. 149).

In order to define the term bullying, we consulted the English-Romanian Dictionary, electronic version, where the verb to bully is translated as follows: „to intimidate, frighten, dominate, among other things, or as a noun, bully, hooligan, tyrant”. Individuals involved in this phenomenon use physical force and harshness to physically or psychologically assault more vulnerable individuals. This translation is reinforced by the opinion of specialists who claim that bullying is a complex form of aggression and violence. However, not every violent act can be considered bullying (Netzelmann *et al.*, 2016, p. 10).

From a terminological perspective, the evolution of the word bullying reveals a different meaning: „in the 16th century, my bully meant my dear, my beloved; a century later, it appeared for the first time with its current meaning, but it was not until the 20th century that this word acquired the academic definitions used today" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2016 apud Netzelmann, 2016, p. 10).

As noted above, this phenomenon has generated significant attention, drawing interest from specialists across multiple disciplines, which has led to a large number of studies examining its characteristics and implications.

Alongside the term bullying, it is necessary to outline the term „beneficiary of the protection system”, as this research is based on the particularities of this social category, presenting bullying from this perspective.

The legislator defines the concept of social protection as follows: „in the context of the principles, values, and traditions governing social relations between individuals, groups, communities, and institutions in the European Union states and represents a set of measures and actions aimed at ensuring a certain level of welfare and social security for the entire population and, in particular, for certain social groups" (Law No. 292 of December 20, 2011).

The establishment of a special measure is a temporary solution, which may be determined, according to the law, in one of the following forms: „with a person or family, with a foster parent or, in the absence of other options, in a licensed residential center" (Law 272/2004, Art. 62). The latter option is only permitted if guardianship cannot be established and there is no possibility of placement with a family or foster parent. During the establishment of the protective measure, the child's domicile is considered to be with the person or institution caring for them.

For children under the age of 7, the law prohibits placement in residential centers, allowing it only in the extended family or with a foster parent. An exception is made for children between the ages of 3 and 7 with severe disabilities, who may be placed in a residential center only if this is justified by an official assessment confirming the child's special needs (Law 272/2004, republished in 2024).

Residential services provide children separated from their parents with temporary or permanent protection and care. These include various types of

housing where children stay for more than 24 hours, and have the following structure: family homes, apartments, emergency centers, and maternal centers. A family home is a space that provides the necessary conditions for up to 12 children, and in special situations, up to 16. Apartments can accommodate up to 6 children. Emergency reception centers provide temporary shelter for up to 30 children for a period of up to 6 months (Art. 123), and maternal centers support up to 9 mother-child couples for up to 2 years. The capacity of the residential centers for these services is determined based on the available space and complies with the minimum standards required by law. These services are managed by the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection, which adapt them to the needs of the children (Law 272/2004, republished 2024, Art. 123).

The protection system's main concern is to ensure the individual well-being of its beneficiaries by meeting their basic needs related to physical security, such as shelter and food. The system is also committed to guaranteeing respect for fundamental rights, including access to quality medical services and health insurance. Another important objective is to support the development of skills necessary for independent living, such as personal and home hygiene, as well as communication and interpersonal skills. These measures are also supported by the premise stated by Bunea and Karacsony (2023): „Protection is based on the assumption that if a child at risk (neglected, abused, exploited, or living in extreme poverty) is provided with adequate resources—both material and social—they will continue to develop at a level comparable to that of children who are not at risk.”

Taking into account the definition of the protection system, it is necessary to specify the category of beneficiaries for whom a protection measure may be established. According to Law No. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, those who benefit from protective measures are: „children whose parents are deceased, unknown, deprived of parental rights, or who have been punished by the deprivation of parental rights, who benefit from legal counseling if their parents cannot exercise parental authority in accordance with the law, or from special guardianship, declared dead or missing by a court, when guardianship could not be established” (Art. 60). The same law specifies that protective measures are also established in the case of abused, neglected, deprived of parental care, or abandoned in health facilities, minors who have committed criminal acts and are not criminally liable (Art. 84), as well as children whose best interests are harmed when living with their parents (Law 272/2004).

It can be observed that children placed in the protection system are typically those who have experienced abuse or neglect, or whose parents are unable to provide a consistent and safe environment. Factors such as the reasons for placement, the child's adaptation to the rules and routines of the care facility or AMP, and their interactions with peers and caregivers all contribute to defining the social and behavioural profile of the beneficiary.

Being a beneficiary of the special protection system can be an additional vulnerability factor, as children in this environment are often perceived as

„different” and are more exposed to stigmatization, exclusion, and, implicitly, bullying behaviours.

2. Forms similar to bullying

As mentioned above, when referring to bullying, we must take into account the forms of bullying that current legislation and specialists attribute to this phenomenon. Thus, according to Law 221/2019 and the opinion of specialists, the following forms and manifestations of bullying are identified: physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying.

The literature supports the complexity of the phenomenon, and in addition to the previously proposed classification of forms of bullying, it proposes another classification, complementary to the one specified: „direct aggression, which includes physical and verbal aggression, and indirect aggression, which includes psychological aggression” (Grădinaru, 2021, pp. 73-74).

Both males and females are victims of bullying, although there are gender differences in how it manifests itself. Boys tend to engage in direct bullying, such as physical and verbal aggression, while girls prefer to use social exclusion and the prejudices and stereotypes that society has. Girls are more likely than boys to report bullying based on their sexual orientation, shape, appearance, and body size.

Women are considered more prone to victimization because of their heightened sensitivity, but also because of society's preconceptions and stereotypes (Zamfirache, 2022, p. 81). Girls are more likely than boys to report bullying based on their sexual orientation, shape, appearance, and body size.

Statistical data published by ANPDCA for the period 2022–2024 indicate that beneficiaries of the special protection system—children in the care of professional foster parents (AMP) or in residential services—continue to be targets of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The most common form of maltreatment in these settings is physical abuse, with over 100 cases reported annually (2022: 115, 2023: 107, 2024: 108). There has also been a worrying increase in cases of emotional abuse, from 24 cases in 2022 to 39 in 2023 and 54 in 2024. Sexual abuse, although reported in smaller numbers (approximately 20–27 cases annually), remains a serious problem with major psychological implications for victims. Added to this are cases of neglect, which peaked at 67 cases in 2023. Although less common, cases of exploitation—whether through labor, sexual exploitation, or for the purpose of committing crimes—confirm the increased vulnerability of institutionalized children.

These alarming statistics indicate that there is a link between being a beneficiary of the protection system and the predisposition to be a victim of bullying. Coming from a foster care center or being placed with professional foster parents leads to the individual being labeled, which in turn leads to exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization. These negative behaviours towards children only intensify the feelings/traumas experienced in the family, making it increasingly difficult to reintegrate into a family or socio-professional environment.

3. Vulnerability factors

About vulnerability factors, specialists identify several aspects that create a favourable environment for a child to become a victim of bullying. Specialists (UNICEF, 2021; Vanderbilt & D., Augustyn, pp. 315-320) identify the following predisposing factors: children with chronic illnesses, physical malformations, students in special education, individuals who do not meet desirable physical standards, the way individuals are perceived by others, generally weak or unable to defend themselves, as well as those who have fewer friends and are therefore unpopular, children who suffer from anxiety, depression, or lack confidence in their own abilities, when some children do not form positive peer relationships with others, they are labeled as annoying or provocative, children from poor families, students who study well and avoid conflict.

It should be noted that no universal factor has been identified that would predict a person's vulnerability to this phenomenon or that would prompt another person to subject others to this form of harassment.

Alongside vulnerability factors, the literature (Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2024, pp. 315-320; Tănărescu and Voicu, 2024, p.7) also identifies a series of „red flags” for both victims and perpetrators. These must be known by both specialists and ordinary members of the community. Concerning victims of bullying, the „red flags” are as follows:

- Physical signs: insomnia, stomachaches and headaches, torn/damaged clothes or personal items, unexplained bruises, cuts, or scratches, etc.
- Psychological signs: depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, suicidal thoughts or gestures, etc.
- Behavioural changes: irritability, lack of concentration, refusal to go to school, etc.
- School and social problems: academic failure, lack of friends, difficulties in relationships with peers, etc.

About the aggressor, specialists (Cociug, 2021, p. 254; Vanderbilt, & D., Augustyn, 2024, pp. 315-320) identify the following signs:

- Intrinsic: aggressive, overly confident, lacking empathy, exhibiting oppositional or destructive behaviours, insecure, reckless, and having unresolved trauma;
- Extrinsic: comes from a family with a high risk of domestic violence, is often physically punished by family members, has a pattern of violent behaviour in conflict resolution learned from family or adult role models, lacks firm rules and consistent guidance, etc.

4. The consequences of bullying

Having presented the vulnerability factors and types of bullying to which beneficiaries of the protection system are exposed, I consider it necessary to provide a complete example of this phenomenon to highlight the effects it has on the individuals involved.

Save the Children Romania has focused on the phenomenon of bullying, highlighting in the article *Stop bullying!* the various consequences experienced by victims. These include the development of a negative self-image, where the child internalizes the belief that something is wrong with them, often resulting in public shaming; social withdrawal, which may initially appear as avoidance of potentially harmful situations, but can escalate to difficulties in adapting to social environments; and academic challenges, such as frequent absenteeism or school dropout, which victims may perceive as the most viable strategy to escape further bullying.

Building on the previously discussed effects, the same article notes that many victims of bullying eventually begin to exhibit similar behaviours toward less powerful peers, with these negative behaviours sometimes extending toward teachers. Academically, these children often experience difficulties, as the stress they endure reduces their motivation to achieve good grades. Long-term exposure to bullying may also lead to the development of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and other related disorders (Save the Children Romania, *Stop bullying!*).

According to professionals participating in the project „The Word is a Stage,” the following signs can be identified in people who are subjected to bullying, visible to any social actor. We are therefore talking about immediate effects, other than those mentioned above: unjustified injuries, headaches or stomachaches, lack of energy, disinterest in everything around them, changes in eating habits, difficulty sleeping, decreased self-confidence, tendency to isolate oneself, self-destructive behaviours, absence of friendships, and inability to defend oneself are some of the manifestations that can occur rapidly after a person has been exposed to bullying (Tănăsescu and Voicu, 2024, p. 10).

The immediate effects of bullying have been presented above, but specialists also highlight (Cociug, 2021, p. 254) a series of long-term negative consequences. A child constantly exposed to such behaviour shows increased vulnerability in adulthood, manifested by low self-esteem, difficulties in initiating and maintaining social relationships, and a tendency to avoid social interactions. These individuals often feel a deep sense of guilt about their own condition, and the difficulty of building trusting relationships significantly affects their adult life, causing problems in obtaining and maintaining employment. In addition, bullying can cause changes in the brain, increasing the risk of mental disorders.

According to the author mentioned above (p. 254), the literature pays particular attention to the effects on victims, but also highlights the negative impact on perpetrators. In the short term, they may experience problems at school, reduced participation in classes, relationship difficulties, and an increased predisposition to alcohol or drug use. In the long term, antisocial tendencies, difficulties in professional integration, and problems in family life, such as abuse of partners or children, are observed. Aggressors may also develop severe emotional and behavioural disorders, such as chronic depression, anxiety, social

withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, self-harming behaviours, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and other mental health conditions.

Analyzing the situation of both individuals involved reveals that each experiences a wide range of negative consequences caused by bullying. Although their roles differ, the phenomenon leaves comparable psychological and social traces on both the victim and the abuser.

Given the above, it is clear that the effects of this phenomenon are detrimental to both the victim and the aggressor. Experts argue that child abuse is linked, in childhood and adolescence, to the development of dysfunctional relationships with peers, and later on, difficulties may arise in the victim's love life (Antonie, 2018, p. 175).

It can be deduced that beneficiaries of the protection system are predisposed to these effects, and traumatic experiences in the family, in the foster care system, and in society create an environment conducive to amplifying these effects in the lives of beneficiaries. Both victims and perpetrators experience short- and long-term effects, and exposure to bullying in childhood has fateful effects in adulthood if individuals do not identify methods of resilience and coping to overcome the situation and its negative effects.

5. Resilience strategies

In order to cope with the repercussions of this phenomenon, beneficiaries of the protection system have used all their inner resources, thus creating strong models of resilience. In the literature, resilience is defined as „the ability of individuals to thrive and achieve self-actualization despite the disadvantages, problems, or difficulties they have experienced” (Stein, 2005 apud Roth, 2019, p. 116).

To supplement the previous definition, we have identified that resilience refers to how a person manages to adapt when going through stressful or challenging periods, maintaining or regaining their balance. In particular, research has focused on children who have experienced trauma or difficult moments in their lives to understand how these things influence their development (Povian, 2015, p. 32).

In the Moral Report on Children Left in State Care. Herod's Children, written by Vlad Alexandrescu, in an interview with a center manager, the latter states that „every child is subject to this phenomenon of bullying. The important thing is how they get through it. How they get through it” (Alexandrescu, 2019, p. 63), thus referring to the methods of resilience adopted by the beneficiaries of the protection system.

The literature identifies several factors that have underpinned the development of resilience among beneficiaries of the protection system, including the following: the existence of a balanced relationship with at least one member of the immediate family and the extended family, the presence of a relationship with at least one adult outside the family who provides validation and whom the beneficiary takes as a role model, having friends, having the opportunity to understand what happened to them, self-esteem, a sense of self-efficacy, independence, and control over one's own life are the individual factors identified

in beneficiaries of the protection system who have developed resilience (Roth, 2019).

A separate ranking of beneficiaries of the protection system is based on their achievements. Roth (2019) identifies the following categories of beneficiaries: those who managed to cope with all the difficult situations in their childhood (moving on) are those beneficiaries who had successful school results; when they left the protection system, they did so in a planned, gradual manner, with discharge taking place on request, and when those who were discharged had security. They feel more „normal” in terms of completing their studies, entering the workforce, and starting a family.

Another category consists of those who merely survive; their lives are marked by instability and violence within the care facility. In their case, leaving the system was abrupt, without support or assistance in the process of social and professional integration. The last category in this hierarchy focuses on those who were exposed to the most traumatic events both before and after the protective measure was put in place. When they leave the system, they are totally unprepared for independent living (pp. 114-115).

Regarding representatives of the first category, specialists state that „some young people possess individual qualities that enable them to exploit the resources and opportunities available to them more effectively, integrating them with past experiences into a positive narrative on which they base their plans for the future” (Bunea, 2019, p. 331).

The article „Perceiving the placement center as an opportunity for development in the case of children and young people at risk,” written by Bunea and Karaksony (2023), highlights the contribution that coming from the protection system has on the development of resilience. Thus, beneficiaries of the protection system enjoy better living conditions, develop new relationships with staff, and form friendships. Other opportunities for personal development and talent development are also identified, which a child from a family that does not provide a stable and secure environment cannot take advantage of.

Resilience is represented by the individual's ability to overcome the repercussions of bullying and everything that the experience of establishing a protective measure entails. Resilience depends on the personal abilities and experiences of the beneficiaries of the protection system within residential centers in Romania. „Resilience remains a matter of resources: in conditions of total absence of resources and/or overwhelming risk situations, it is unrealistic to expect positive results” (Bunea, 2019, p. 331).

6. From victim to aggressor

The literature shows that beneficiaries of the protection system have adopted a particular strategy to free themselves from the pressure created by their role as victims, becoming aggressors themselves (Cociug, 2021, p. 254). They adopt such behaviour for various reasons, such as the need to be respected, the desire to control situations or people around them, lack of empathy, impulsiveness, or even

the pleasure of causing suffering to others. There is also a similarity between the victim and the aggressor, in the sense that some children „put on an aggressor's armor” to hide their vulnerabilities and avoid becoming victims themselves. The aggressor's mask functions as a shield that hides the individual's fragile interior. According to the same source, most of those who become aggressors were themselves victims of violence in childhood, and in the absence of appropriate intervention measures, this type of behaviour tends to persist and even worsen over time.

Concerning children's predisposition to become abusers, the following characteristics are identified in the adoption of the abuser role: belonging to an inappropriate group, those who hold power and control and are overly concerned with maintaining this status, trying to subjugate those weaker than themselves. The other category refers to those children who are isolated, ignored by their peers, and who display low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, and show no interest in education (UNICEF, 2021, p. 8).

In order to outline the profile of the aggressor, specialists say that they need to be in control and to subjugate others; they need validation. The vast majority of aggressors grew up in an unfavorable environment marked by conflict, so it is assumed that aggressors have a degree of hostility toward their environment and that the suffering of their victims gives them satisfaction. Last but not least, there is an advantageous component to this behaviour, which offers a set of financial and material benefits to the aggressor. Aggressors often receive the objects and products they demand to refrain from exercising their aggression. Complementing aggressive behaviour is the social prestige that many aggressors enjoy and exploit (Grigore, 2016, pp. 79-80). From the perspective of specialists, a broad picture emerges of the abuser, who, for various intrinsic reasons, ends up resorting to this form of behaviour.

There is only one step from victim to aggressor, most of the time, children in the protection system, because of the abuse they are subjected to, to put up a barrier and because they choose to get out of the difficult situation they are in, prefer to adopt such behaviour, which allows them to have supremacy in their relationship with other beneficiaries and which brings them several advantages.

7. Conclusions

Bullying is recognized as one of the most harmful forms of abuse that can take various forms—physical, verbal, relational, or psychological—and affects the bio-psycho-social balance of both the victim and the aggressor. For beneficiaries of the protection system, the risk of becoming victims of bullying is high due to emotional instability, lack of family support, and social stigmatization. Types of bullying can be difficult to identify in these environments, but the effects are often more severe: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and difficulties in social integration. Understanding the negative effects of bullying is essential to recognize the needs and provide the necessary support to victims.

Recent data from ANPDCA indicate that the number of abuse cases among children in the protection system has been rising between 2022 and 2024. The most common forms are physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. It is difficult for beneficiaries to report these cases, especially because they must also be reported through the institution that manages the protection measure, namely the DGASPC, through the Child's Helpline - 119. This situation means that many children feel insecure or reluctant to ask for help, and so problems may go unreported. Bullying is therefore not just a form of aggression between children, but is part of a wider context in which vulnerable children need real support and a safe environment to develop.

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