



Title	Analyzing trends in bullying victimization from 2017 to 2022 : Focusing on the variations in occurrence frequencies
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Citation	子ども発達臨床研究, 20, 15-24
Issue Date	2024-06-10
DOI	10.14943/rcccd.20.15
Doc URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2115/92663">http://hdl.handle.net/2115/92663</a>
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	003-1882-1707-20.pdf



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## 一般論文

# Analyzing trends in bullying victimization from 2017 to 2022 : Focusing on the variations in occurrence frequencies

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## Abstract

This study investigated the trends in school bullying from 2017 to 2022 by focusing the frequencies of occurrence. During this period, a series of surveys was conducted, in which a total of 23,704 Japanese students from fifth to ninth grades participated. The findings revealed a decrease in the overall prevalence of school bullying; however, incidents of high-frequency bullying victimization did not exhibit a similar decline. This suggests that high-frequency bullying victimization is both more prevalent and persistent than less frequent occurrences, underlining that frequent bullying remains a significant concern among Japanese students.

**Key Words** : trend; school bullying; high-frequency victimization; severe cases

## Introduction

Research on school bullying has spanned over three decades, with scholars across various countries striving to understand its prevalence and devising strategies to prevent and intervene in existing cases of bullying. Despite these extensive efforts, two fundamental questions remain: Have these endeavors been successful? More specifically, has there been a tangible decrease in the prevalence of school bullying as a result?

Focusing on the general prevalence of school bullying worldwide, the evidence suggests a decrease in many instances. Molcho et al. (2009) analyzed trends over 12 years in victimization among adolescents in North American and

European countries, finding that over 70% of these countries experienced a reduction in victimization rates from 1993 to 2005. Similarly, Kennedy (2019) observed a decline in school bullying in the United States, with a meta-regression analysis indicating a significant decrease from 2005 to 2017. However, the prevalence of school bullying remains stable or even increases in some countries (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 2007; Molcho et al., 2009), particularly in cases of high-frequency (or severe) bullying (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Despite the observed decrease from 1993 to 2005, recent trends suggest a stabilization: The Department of Education in England (2018) reported minimal changes in bullying prevalence, ranging from 15% to 17%

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between 2013 and 2017, and the rates of severe school bullying remained around 5% in Sweden (from 1993 to 2017; Bjereld et al., 2020) and in Norway (from 2010 to 2020; Statista Research Department, 2021). Given that England and Norway have implemented anti-bullying programs for decades with the involvement of many experts, these findings may indicate the persistent challenge of eradicating school bullying, underscoring the need for further investigation into the factors contributing to these outcomes.

In Japan, the exploration of school bullying's prevalence has been primarily undertaken through two main surveys. The first is a longitudinal survey initiated by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER) in 1998. This survey, focusing on a representative sample of thousands of students from 4th to 9th grade in a metropolitan area city, is conducted biannually, with findings published every three years. Utilizing a new school bullying questionnaire, the survey has revealed a slight decrease in the prevalence of school bullying in primary schools from 1998 to 2018. However, the trend in secondary schools has remained relatively stable over the same period (NIER, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2021). Additionally, the occurrence of frequent school bullying, defined as more than once a week, has also shown stability in both primary and secondary schools (NIER, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2016, 2021).

The second significant survey in Japan is a cross-sectional study initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in 2008. Beyond utilizing questionnaires, this survey also includes "recognized cases" of bullying identified through direct reports from students or their parents, and observations made by teachers. The findings show that the number of "recognized cases" remained

stable from 1985 to 2012 but experienced a significant increase from 2013 onwards (MEXT, 2022). Furthermore, the survey investigates "extreme situations" of school bullying, as defined by Article 28 of the Act for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Bullying. An "extreme situation" occurs when bullying "may have caused serious damage to the life, physical or mental state, or property of a child enrolled in the school" or "may have forced a child enrolled in the school to be absent for a considerable period of time." The incidence of such "extreme situations" has shown a similar increasing trend from 2013 to 2022 (MEXT, 2022).

The contrasting results from the two surveys are indeed noteworthy. However, direct comparison of their outcomes is challenging due to differences in sample size, geographic region covered, questionnaires used, and even the definitions of school bullying adopted by each survey. Additionally, there could be an overlap in the "recognized cases" within the MEXT survey, as data is collected from multiple sources. For instance, with over 30% of schools conducting the questionnaire anonymously, a single incident of bullying might be counted more than once if a student reports their experience both in the questionnaire and it is also identified by teachers or reported by parents.

Another contributing factor could be the increased awareness of school bullying. Following the enactment of the Act for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Bullying in 2013, educational boards and schools have been mandated to protect students from bullying, heightening sensitivity to such incidents. As a result, students, parents, and teachers may now be more inclined to recognize and report behaviors as school bullying, potentially inflating the number of recognized cases. This suggests that the actual situation of school bullying might not have significantly changed,

although this hypothesis requires further investigation to be substantiated.

In summary, the global situation concerning school bullying appears to be somewhat bleak, characterized by a stable trend in frequent (or severe) bullying, with a significant increase in “recognized cases” in Japan. To further investigate the state of bullying victimization, a series of large-scale surveys was conducted in X city from 2017 to 2022. Drawing upon previous research, this study hypothesizes that: 1) there is no increase but a slight decrease in the prevalence of school bullying from 2017 to 2022; and 2) the prevalence of frequent school bullying remain more stable compared to instances of less frequent bullying.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Between 2017 and 2022, a series of surveys was undertaken, involving a total of 23,704 students (11,787 boys, 11,715 girls, 202 missing; age range 10–15 years) from X City, Japan. The sample included 4,894 fifth graders, 4,970 sixth graders, 4,618 seventh graders, 4,592 eighth graders, and 4,596 ninth graders (34 missing). Questionnaires were distributed to all participants to be completed at home and then returned in sealed envelopes, a measure designed to minimize anxiety and encourage honest reporting of school bullying experiences. Furthermore, these surveys were conducted with the formal approval of the research ethics committee from the Educational Department of Hokkaido University.

### Material

**Demographic information.** Prior to assessing bullying victimization, demographic information was collected for subsequent analysis.

Specifically, the questionnaire solicited information on gender, age, and grade level of the participants. For the purposes of later analysis, grade levels were categorized into two groups: primary school, encompassing 5th and 6th grades, and secondary school, including 7th, 8th, and 9th grades.

**Bullying Victimization.** An eight-item victimization scale was adjusted from a Japanese national project named “A follow-up survey of school bullying” (NIER, 2016, p. 15). Participants were asked, “In this school year, have you ever experienced the following things by someone in your school?” to report their experiences of victimization on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *only once*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *once a week*, and 5 = *several times a week*). The scale comprised two physical items (jokingly tapped or pushed by someone; kicked or punched by someone), two relational items (ignored by someone; backbitten by someone), one material item (my property was taken or hidden), one verbal item (called my names), one cyber item (someone did bad things to me using cellphone or computer), and one sexual item (being sexually harassed such as take off clothes). In this study, the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was ranged from .77 to .81.

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to illustrate the trends in bullying victimization from 2017 to 2022. Proportion tests were utilized to assess the differences in the prevalence of bullying victimization between 2017 and 2022, with Cohen’s  $d$  calculated to quantify the effect size of the differences in prevalence rates over these years. Additionally, the prevalence rates were analyzed by gender and school type to provide a detailed understanding of the dynamics of bullying victimization among children in recent years.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics for bullying victimization

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	<i>M</i>	<i>d</i>
Only once	16.9%	17.3%	13.7%	15.8%	14.6%	14.6%	15.5%	.063
Once a month	9.1%	8.4%	7.3%	6.9%	7.8%	7.9%	7.9%	.043
Once a week	7.0%	6.5%	5.8%	6.1%	6.8%	7.4%	6.6%	-.015
Several times a week	8.4%	8.9%	8.1%	6.8%	8.1%	7.4%	8.0%	.037
Total	41.4%	41.1%	34.9%	35.6%	37.3%	37.3%	37.9%	.084

## Results

The trend of bullying victimization from 2017 to 2022 is depicted in Figure 1, with the corresponding descriptive statistics presented in Table 1. Cohen's *d* values were also calculated to quantify the effect sizes, highlighting the differences in the prevalence rates of bullying victimization between 2017 and 2022. From Table 1, it is evident that the overall prevalence of bullying victimization showed a general decreasing trend. However, an inspection of specific frequencies revealed an increase in prevalence for incidents occurring "once a week." Proportion

tests comparing the prevalences of school bullying between 2017 and 2022 indicated a significant decrease in the prevalence of incidents reported as "only once" ( $p = .004$ ,  $d = .063$ ) and "once a month" ( $p = .049$ ,  $d = .043$ ). Conversely, no significant changes were detected for bullying incidents reported as "once a week" ( $p = .519$ ,  $d = -.015$ ) and "several times a week" ( $p = .097$ ,  $d = .037$ ).

The bullying victimization prevalences, further differentiated by gender and school type, is summarized in Table 2. Trends differentiated by these categories are depicted in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5. Overall, both primary school boys and

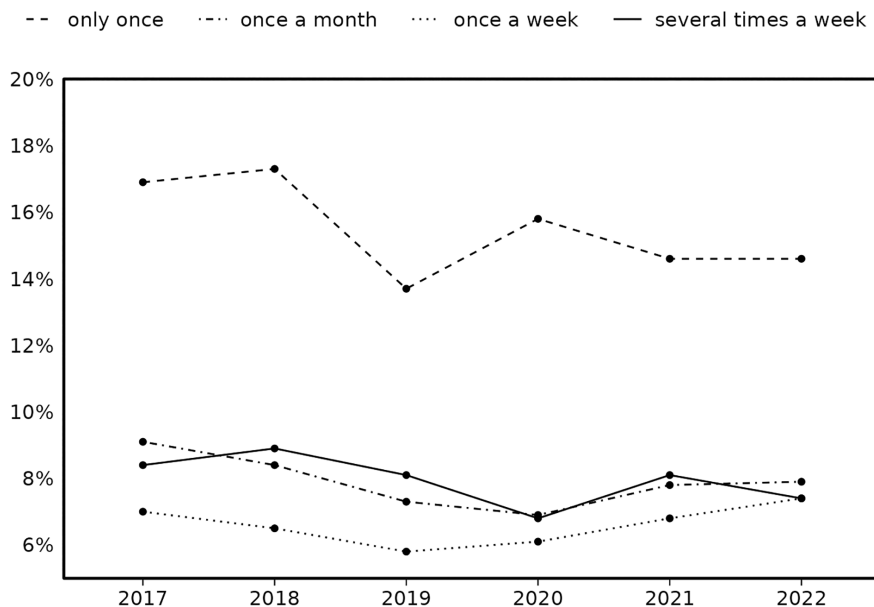


Figure 1. The trend of bullying victimization from 2017 to 2022

Table 2. Bullying victimization by gender and school type

category	level	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	<i>M</i>	<i>d</i>
primary school boys	once	20.5%	20.2%	16.3%	22.4%	19.7%	19.4%	19.8%	.027
	once a month	13.1%	10.7%	10.1%	11.1%	12.0%	11.6%	11.4%	.046
	once a week	9.8%	11.4%	8.8%	10.8%	9.6%	11.4%	10.3%	-.049
	several times a week	11.3%	13.0%	11.7%	12.8%	13.4%	12.8%	12.5%	-.045
primary school girls	once	22.8%	23.2%	21.9%	21.9%	18.9%	20.2%	21.5%	.063
	once a month	9.8%	9.0%	8.9%	5.4%	7.3%	6.9%	7.9%	.104
	once a week	5.1%	6.8%	5.7%	4.2%	7.3%	7.5%	6.1%	-.096
	several times a week	7.4%	7.6%	5.1%	4.2%	6.1%	6.4%	6.1%	.038
secondary school boys	once	12.2%	11.3%	8.2%	10.9%	10.8%	9.5%	10.5%	.088
	once a month	7.2%	7.1%	5.2%	6.5%	7.2%	7.4%	6.8%	-.006
	once a week	7.8%	5.8%	5.3%	6.3%	6.0%	7.4%	6.4%	.016
	several times a week	10.0%	10.3%	8.8%	7.9%	8.4%	7.0%	8.7%	.106
secondary school girls	once	15.0%	17.1%	10.7%	11.8%	12.0%	11.9%	13.1%	.089
	once a month	7.8%	7.8%	6.2%	5.3%	6.1%	6.3%	6.6%	.058
	once a week	5.3%	3.7%	4.1%	3.9%	5.4%	4.5%	4.5%	.037
	several times a week	5.4%	5.5%	6.8%	3.2%	5.6%	4.8%	5.2%	.024

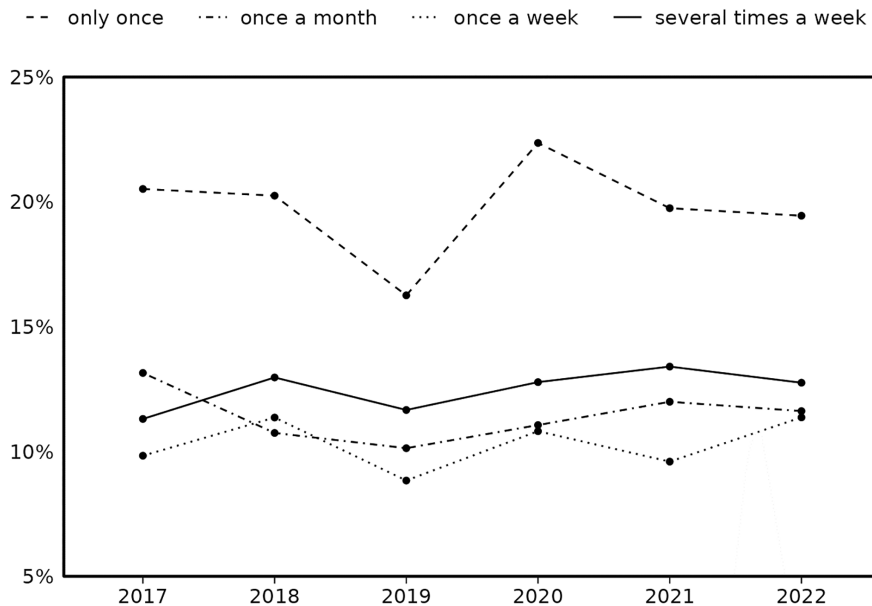


Figure 2. Trend of victimization among primary school boys

girls exhibited higher percentages of infrequent victimization (i.e., only once), whereas primary school and secondary school boys demonstrated

higher percentages of frequent victimization (i.e., several times a week). Proportion tests were conducted to examine the differences between

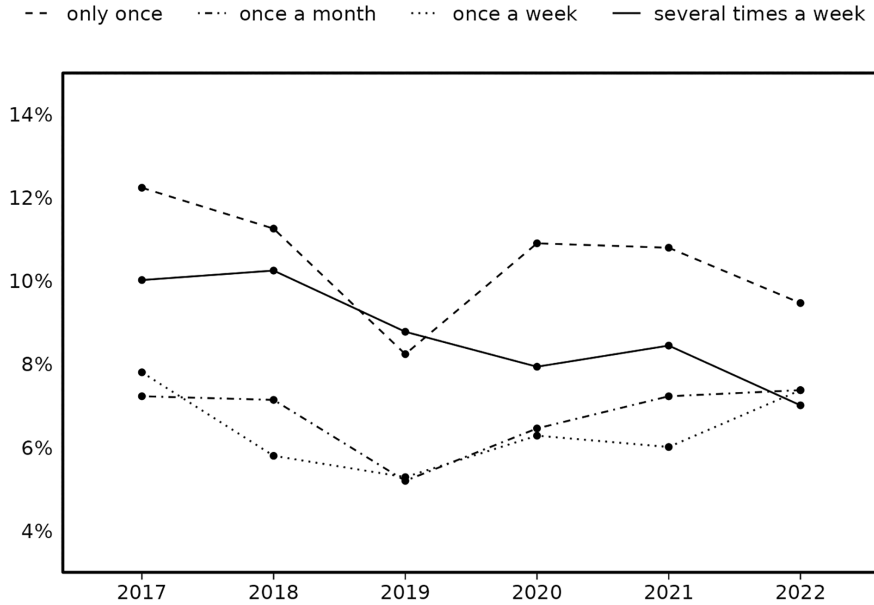


Figure 4. Trend of victimization among secondary school boys

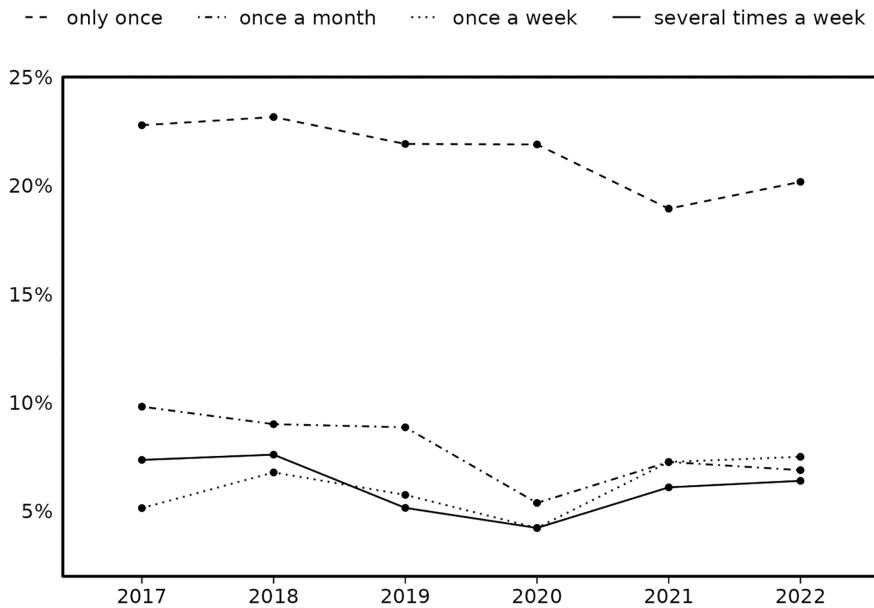


Figure 3. Trend of victimization among primary school girls

2017 and 2022, assessing changes in recent trends. Significant reductions were observed in the prevalence of victimization that occurred “only once” among both boys and girls in secondary school ( $p = .033$ ,  $d = .088$  and  $p = .031$ ,  $d = .089$ , respectively), “once a month” among primary school girls ( $p = .031$ ,  $d = .104$ ), and “several times a week” among secondary school boys ( $p = .010$ ,  $d = .106$ ). Conversely, a significant increase was noted in “once a week” victimization among primary school girls ( $p = .047$ ,  $d = .096$ ). No significant differences were found for the rest comparison ( $ps > .05$ ).

## Discussion

The results lend support to the initial hypotheses. Firstly, this study observed a decrease in the overall prevalence of school bullying (defined as occurrences more than once) from 41.4% to 37.3%, with an effect size of .084. This

suggests that the situation of bullying victimization has not worsened but has slightly decreased. Further analysis indicated that infrequent bullying (categorized as “only once” and “once a month”) significantly declined, whereas high-frequency bullying did not follow a similar pattern. Remarkably, the average percentage of bullying incidents reported as “several times a week” from 2017 to 2022 was higher than all other frequencies, except for those reported as “only once.” This indicates that high-frequency bullying victimization is both more common and persistent compared to less frequent occurrences, highlighting that frequent bullying remains a significant issue among Japanese students.

The prevalence of school bullying among secondary school students was found to be relatively lower than that among primary school students, particularly for infrequent victimization. This finding aligns with the national survey results reported by MEXT (2022), which indicated

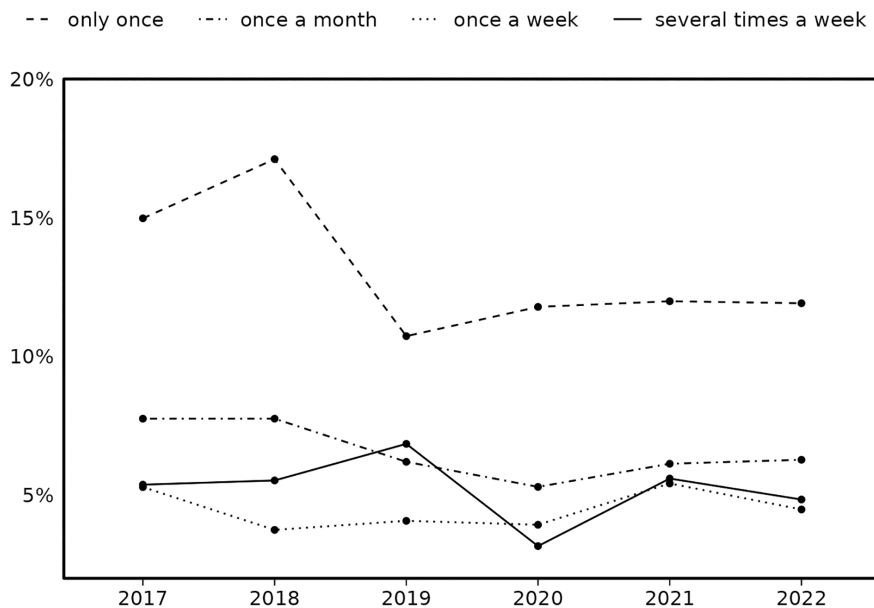


Figure 5. Trend of victimization among secondary school girls



a higher incidence of recognized cases of school bullying in primary schools compared to secondary schools. Furthermore, almost no significant changes were observed in the prevalence of school bullying among primary school students between 2017 and 2022, suggesting that, at least from a quantitative perspective, school bullying in primary school has not become more pervasive.

Despite efforts to mitigate participants' anxiety about reporting bullying, it remains possible that some victims opted not to disclose their experiences. This highlights the need for sensitive and well-trained teachers capable of recognizing and addressing bullying. However, distinguishing school bullying from play fighting—a common behavior among primary school students (Weisfeld & Weisfeld, 2013)—presents a significant challenge through observation alone. Consequently, equipping teachers with more objective and scientific methods for identifying school bullying, or developing a more reliable self-reporting system for students, becomes imperative.

Given that the prevalence rates remain relatively high without significant decline in recent years, it can be inferred that the situation of school bullying in primary schools has not substantially changed up to the present. Moreover, while a significant decrease was observed in the prevalence of infrequent bullying among secondary school students, this downward trend does not extend to high-frequency bullying. Considering the resolution rates of around 80% reported by MEXT (2020, 2021, 2022), it is challenging to assert that bullying cases have been effectively addressed. Even if resolutions are being achieved, it appears that they may predominantly involve less frequent instances of bullying, leaving more severe cases difficult to resolve.

Moreover, the data revealed that boys were victimized more frequently than girls in both primary and secondary schools. Notably, while there was a significant decrease in the prevalence of severe victimization among secondary school boys, dropping to 8.7%, this rate remained higher than that for secondary school girls, which stood at 5.2%. This disparity suggests that boys are more frequently victimized compared to girls, a difference that may stem from boys' greater involvement in direct forms of victimization, as documented in previous studies (Arslan et al., 2011; Olweus, 1994). Given that the prevalence rates were calculated based on the highest value across eight items, there's a probability that these comparisons encompass different forms of bullying. Specifically, the reported prevalence may reflect direct victimization for boys and relational victimization for girls, with girls being more prone to the latter (Chester et al., 2017; Smith, 2014). Consequently, this disparity does not necessarily indicate that boys are in a more severe situation, as the impact of various forms of bullying on physical and mental health can differ significantly.

In conclusion, this study reveals that high-frequency bullying victimization is more enduring and serious compared to its infrequent counterparts. The findings suggest that the higher the frequency of bullying, the less likely it is to decrease over time. Future studies should focus on the effective intervene method for the high-frequency bullying victimization.

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## 要 旨

本研究は2017年から2022年にかけての小中学校でのいじめ被害の傾向を、発生頻度に注目し、調査を実施した。この期間に、合計23,704人の日本人の生徒（小学5年生から中学3年生）が調査に参加した。その結果、全体的にみて、この期間の間に学校でのいじめ被害の発生率が減少したことが明らかになったが、深刻（高頻度）ないじめ被害の発生に関しては、全体と同様の減少傾向は示されなかった。これは、深刻ないじめ被害が、頻度の低いものと比較してより持続することを示しており、深刻ないじめ被害が日本の児童生徒の間で依然として重大な問題であることを示唆していると考えられる。

**キーワード：**傾向；いじめ；深刻ないじめ被害；重大事案