Cyberbullying
Identification, Prevention, and Response

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Kids have been bullying each other for generations. The latest generation, however, has been able to utilize technology to expand their reach and the extent of their harm. This phenomenon is being called *cyberbullying*, defined as: "*willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.*" Basically, we are referring to incidents where adolescents use technology, usually computers or cell phones, to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their peers. For example, youth can send hurtful text messages to others or spread rumors using cell phones or computers. Teens have also created web pages, videos, profiles on social networking sites making fun of others. With cell phones, adolescents have taken pictures in a bedroom, a bathroom, or another location where privacy is expected, and posted or distributed them online. More recently, some have recorded unauthorized videos of other kids and uploaded them for the world to see, rate, tag, and discuss.

What are some of the negative effects that cyberbullying can have on a person?

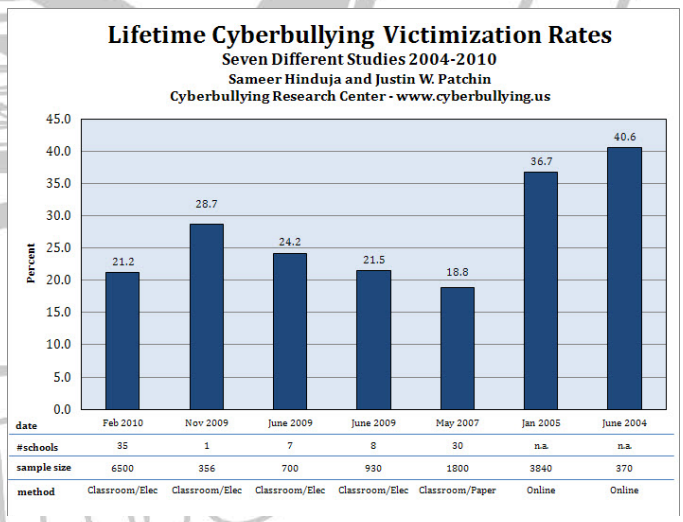
There are many detrimental outcomes associated with cyberbullying that reach into the real world. First, many targets of cyberbullying report feeling depressed, sad, angry, and frustrated. As one teenager stated: "It makes me hurt both physically and mentally. It scares me and takes away all my confidence. It makes me feel sick and worthless." Victims who experience cyberbullying also reveal that they were afraid or embarrassed to go to school. In addition, research has revealed a link between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school violence, and delinquent behavior. Finally, cyberbullied youth also report having suicidal thoughts, and there have been a number of examples in the United States where youth who were victimized ended up taking their own lives.

Where does cyberbullying commonly occur?

Cyberbullying occurs across a variety of venues and mediums in cyberspace, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it occurs most often where teenagers congregate. Initially, many kids hung out in chat rooms, and as a result that is where most harassment took place. In recent years, most youth are have been drawn to social networking websites (such as Facebook) and video-sharing websites (such as YouTube). This trend has led to increased reports of cyberbullying occurring in those environments. Instant messaging on the Internet or text messaging via a cell phone also appear to be common ways in which youth are harassing others. We are also seeing it happen with portable gaming devices, in 3-D virtual worlds and social gaming sites, and in newer interactive sites such as Formspring and ChatRoulette.

How much cyberbullying is out there?

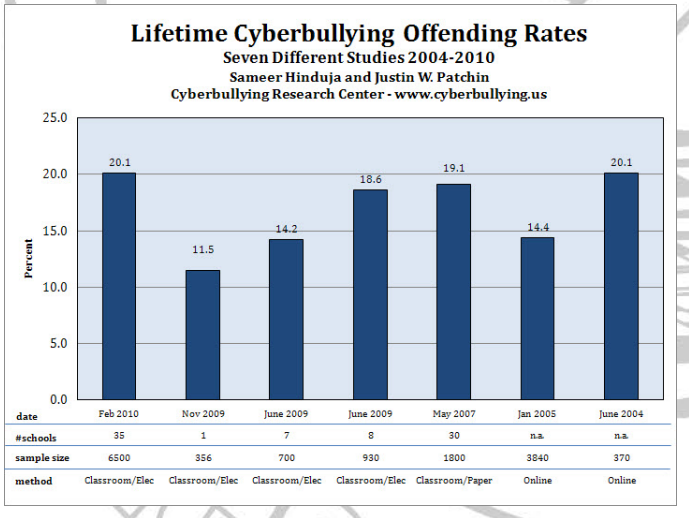
Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely (ranging from 10-40% or more), depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined. In our research, we inform students that cyberbullying is when someone "repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like." Using this definition, about 20% of the over 4,400 randomly-selected 11-18 year-old students in 2010 indicated they had been a victim at some point in their life. About this same number admitted to cyberbullying others during their lifetime. Finally, about 10% of kids in this recent study said they had both been a victim and an offender.



How is cyberbullying different from traditional bullying?

While often similar in terms of form and technique, bullying and cyberbullying have many differences that can make the latter even more devastating. First, victims often do not know who the bully is, or why they are being targeted. The cyberbully can cloak his or her identity behind a computer or cell phone using anonymous email addresses or pseudonymous screen names. Second, the hurtful actions of a cyberbully are viral; that is, a large number of people (at school, in the neighborhood, in the city, in the world!) can be involved in a cyber-attack on a victim, or at least find out about the incident with a few keystrokes or clicks of the mouse. The perception, then, is that absolutely everyone knows about it.

Third, it is often easier to be cruel using technology because cyberbullying can be done from a physically distant location, and the bully doesn't have to see the immediate response by the target. In fact, some teens simply might not recognize the serious harm they are causing because they are sheltered from the victim's response. Finally, while parents and teachers are doing a better job supervising youth at school and at home, many adults don't have the technological know-how to keep track of what teens are up to online. As a result, a victim's experience may be missed and a bully's actions may be left unchecked. Even if bullies are identified, many adults find themselves unprepared to adequately respond.



Why is cyberbullying becoming a major issue?

Cyberbullying is a growing problem because increasing numbers of kids are using and have completely embraced interactions via computers and cell phones. Two-thirds of youth go online every day for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations, or for many other reasons. Because the online communication tools have become an important part of their lives, it is not surprising that some kids have decided to use the technology to be malicious or menacing towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7 means they are susceptible to victimization (and able to act on mean intentions toward others) around the clock. Apart from a measure of anonymity, it is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. And because some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

Cyberbullying crosses all geographical boundaries. The Internet has really opened up the whole world to users who access it on a broad array of devices, and for the most part this has been a good thing. Nevertheless, because of the issues previously discussed, some kids feel free to post or send whatever they want while online without considering how that content can inflict pain – and sometimes cause severe psychological and emotional wounds.

What are the biggest challenges in the fight to stop cyberbullying?

There are two challenges today that make it difficult to prevent cyberbullying. First, many people don't see the harm associated with it. Some attempt to dismiss or disregard cyberbullying because there are "more serious forms of aggression to worry about." While it is true that there are many issues facing adolescents, parents, teachers, and law enforcement today, we first need to accept that cyberbullying is one such problem that will only get more serious if ignored.

The other challenge relates to who is willing to step up and take responsibility for responding to inappropriate use of technology. Parents often say that they don't have the technical skills to keep up with their kids' online behavior; teachers are afraid to intervene in behaviors that often occur away from school; and law enforcement is hesitant to get involved unless there is clear evidence of a crime or a significant threat to someone's physical safety. As a result, cyberbullying incidents often slip through the cracks. Indeed, the behavior often continues and escalates because they are not quickly addressed. Based on these challenges, we collectively need to create an environment where kids feel comfortable talking with adults about this problem and feel confident that meaningful steps will be taken to resolve the situation. We also need to get everyone involved - youth, parents, educators, counselors, law enforcement, social media companies, and the community at large. It will take a concerted and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders to really make a difference in reducing cyberbullying.

Are there any warning signs that might indicate when cyberbullying is occurring?

A child or teenager may be a victim of cyberbullying if he or she: unexpectedly stops using their computer or cell phone; appears nervous or jumpy when an instant message or email appears; appears uneasy about going to school or outside in general; appears to be angry, depressed, or frustrated after using the computer or cell phone; avoids discussions about what they are doing on the computer or cell phone; or becomes abnormally withdrawn from usual friends and family members.

Similarly, a child or teenager may be engaging in cyberbullying behaviors if he or she: quickly switches screens or closes programs when you walk by; gets unusually upset if computer or cell phone privileges are restricted; avoids discussions about what they are doing on the computer or cell phone; or appears to be using multiple online accounts (or an account that is not their own). In general, if a youth acts in ways that are inconsistent with their usual behavior when using these communication devices, it's time to find out why.

What can parents do?

The best tack parents can take when their child is cyberbullied is to make sure they feel (and are) safe and secure, and to convey unconditional support. Parents must demonstrate to their children through words and actions that they both desire the same end result: that the cyberbullying stop and that life does not become even more difficult. This can be accomplished by working together to arrive at a mutually-agreeable course of action, as sometimes it is appropriate (and important) to solicit the child's perspective as to what might be done to improve the situation. If necessary, parents should explain the importance of scheduling a meeting with school administrators (or a teacher they trust) to discuss the matter. Parents may also be able to contact the father or mother of the offender, and/or work with the Internet Service Provider, Cell Phone Service Provider, or Content Provider to investigate the issue or remove the offending material. The police should also be approached when physical threats are involved or a crime has possibly been committed.

Overall, parents must educate their kids about appropriate online behaviors (and kids must follow these guidelines!). They should also monitor their child's activities while online – especially early in their exploration of cyberspace. This can be done informally (through active participation in your child's Internet experience, which we recommend most of all) and formally (through software). Cultivate and maintain an open, candid line of communication with your children, so that they are ready and willing to come to you whenever they experience something unpleasant or distressing when interacting via computer or cell phone. Teach and reinforce positive morals and values that are taught in the home about how others should be treated with respect and dignity.

Parents may also utilize an "Internet Use Contract" and a "Cell Phone Use Contract" to foster a crystal-clear understanding about what is and is not appropriate with respect to the use of technology. Within these documents, both the child and the parent agree to abide by certain mutually-acceptable rules of engagement. To remind the child of this pledged commitment, we recommend that this contract be posted in a highly visible place (e.g., next to the computer). When there are violations to this contract, immediate consequences must be given that are proportionate to the misbehavior, and that leave an impact. Kids need to learn that inappropriate online actions will not be tolerated. Victims of cyberbullying (and the bystanders who observe it) must know for sure that the adults who they tell will intervene rationally and logically, and not make the situation worse.

If a parent discovers that their child is cyberbullying others, they should first communicate how that behavior inflicts harm and causes pain in the real world as well as in cyberspace. Depending on the level of seriousness of the incident, and whether it seems that the child has realized the hurtful nature of his or her behavior, consequences should be firmly applied (and escalated if the behavior continues). If the incident was particularly severe, parents may want to consider installing tracking or filtering software, or removing technology privileges altogether for a period of time. Moving forward, it is essential that parents pay even greater attention to the Internet and cell phone activities of their child to make sure that they have internalized the lesson and are acting in responsible ways.

"She kept texting me so many mean things that I wanted to throw my phone against the wall. I told my mom and she called her. After that the mean girls texted me, wow you can't fight your own battles!"

-11-year-old from Michigan

What should schools do to prevent cyberbullying?

The most important preventive step that schools can take is to educate the school community about responsible Internet use. Students need to know that all forms of bullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or threatening behaviors will be subject to discipline. It is therefore important to discuss issues related to the

appropriate use of online communications technology in various areas of the general curriculum. To be sure, these messages should be reinforced in classes that regularly utilize technology. Signage also should be posted in the computer lab or at each computer workstation to remind students of the rules of acceptable use. In general, it is crucial to establish and maintain a school climate of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

Furthermore, school district personnel should review their harassment and bullying policies to see if they allow for the discipline of students who engage in cyberbullying. If their policy covers it, cyberbullying incidents that occur at school - or that originate off campus but ultimately result in a substantial disruption of the learning environment - are well within a school's legal authority to intervene. The school then needs to make it clear to students, parents, and all staff that these behaviors are unacceptable and will be subject to discipline. In some cases, simply discussing the incident with the offender's parents will result in the behavior stopping.

What should schools do to respond to cyberbullying?

Students should already know that cyberbullying is unacceptable and that the behavior will result in discipline. Utilize school liaison officers or other members of law enforcement to thoroughly investigate incidents, as needed, if the behaviors cross a certain threshold of severity. Once the offending party has been identified, develop a response that is commensurate with the harm done and the disruption that occurred.

School administrators should also work with parents to convey to the student that cyberbullying behaviors are taken seriously and are not trivialized. Moreover, schools should come up with creative response strategies, particularly for relatively minor forms of harassment that do not result in significant harm. For example, students may be required to create anti-cyberbullying posters to be displayed throughout the school. Older students might be required to give a brief presentation to younger students about the importance of using technology in ethically-sound ways. The point here, again, is to condemn the behavior while sending a message to the rest of the school community that bullying in any form is wrong and will not be tolerated.

Even though the vast majority of these incidents can be handled informally (calling parents, counseling the bully and target, expressing condemnation of the behavior), there may be occasions where formal response from the school is warranted. This is particularly the case in incidents involving serious threats toward another student, if the target no longer feels comfortable coming to school, or if cyberbullying behaviors continue after informal attempts to stop it have failed. In these cases, detention, suspension, changes of placement, or even expulsion may be necessary. If these extreme measures are required, it is important that educators are able to clearly demonstrate the link to school and present evidence that supports their action.

How is cyberbullying and school climate related?

The benefits of a positive school climate have been identified through much research over the last thirty years. It contributes to more consistent attendance, higher student achievement, and other desirable student outcomes. Though limited, the research done on school climate and traditional bullying also underscores its importance in preventing peer conflict. For instance, researchers have found that bullies view their school climate as substantially inferior as compared to victims. Another study based on data collected from students in New Brunswick found that *disciplinary climate* – the "extent to which students internalize the norms and values of the school, and conform to them" reduced the frequency of bullying among youth.

One of our recent studies found that students who experienced cyberbullying (both those who were victims and those who admitted to cyberbullying others) perceived a poorer climate at their school than those who had not experienced cyberbullying. Youth were asked whether they "enjoy going to school," "feel safe at school," "feel that teachers at their school really try to help them succeed," and "feel that teachers at their school care about them." Those who admitted to cyberbullying others or who were the target of cyberbullying were less likely to agree with those statements.

"I get mean messages on Formspring, with people telling me I'm fat and ugly and stupid. I don't know what I ever did to anyone. I wish it wasn't anonymous."
-15-year-old from Illinois

Overall, it is critical for educators to develop and promote a safe and respectful school climate. A positive on-campus environment will go a long way in reducing the frequency of many problematic behaviors at school, including bullying and harassment. In this setting, teachers must demonstrate emotional support, a warm and caring atmosphere, a strong focus on academics and learning, and a fostering of healthy self-esteem. Additionally, it is crucial that the school seeks to create and promote an atmosphere where certain conduct not tolerated—by students and

staff alike. In schools with healthy climates, students know what is appropriate and what is not.

What can youth do?

Most importantly, youth should develop a relationship with an adult they trust (a parent, teacher, or someone else) so they can talk about any experiences they have online (or off) that make them upset or uncomfortable. If possible, teens should ignore minor teasing or name calling, and not respond to the bully as that might simply make the problem continue. It's also useful to keep all evidence of cyberbullying to show an adult who can help with the situation. If targets of cyberbullying are able to keep a log or a journal of the dates and times and instances of the online harassment, that can also help prove what was going on and who started it.

Overall, youth should go online with their parents – show them what web sites they use, and why. At the same time, they need to be responsible when interacting with others on the Internet. For instance, they shouldn't say anything to anyone online that they wouldn't say to them in person with their parents in the room. Finally, youth ought to take advantage of the privacy settings within Facebook and other websites, and the social software (instant messaging, email, and chat programs) that they use – they are there to help reduce the chances of victimization. Users can adjust the settings to restrict and monitor who can contact them and who can read their online content.

What can bystanders do?

Bystanders also have a very critical role to play. Those who witness cyberbullying generally do not want to get involved because of the hassle and problems they fear it might bring upon them, yet they often recognize that what they are seeing is not right and should stop. However, by doing *nothing,* bystanders are doing *something.* We have a responsibility to look out for the best interests of each other. We believe that bystanders can make a huge difference in improving the situation for cyberbullying victims, who often feel helpless and hopeless and need someone to come to the rescue. Bystanders should note what they see and when. They should also stand up for the victim, and tell an adult they trust who can really step in and improve the situation. Finally, they should never encourage or indirectly contribute to the behavior – by forwarding hurtful messages, laughing at inappropriate jokes or content, condoning the act just to "fit in," or otherwise silently allowing it to continue.

What can law enforcement do?

Law enforcement officers also have a role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying. To begin, they need to be aware of ever-evolving state and local laws concerning online behaviors, and equip themselves with the skills and knowledge to intervene as necessary. In a recent survey of school resource officers, we found that almost one-quarter did not know if their state had a cyberbullying law. This is surprising since their most visible responsibility involves responding to actions which are in violation of law (e.g., harassment, threats, stalking). Even if the behavior doesn't immediately appear to rise to the level of a crime, officers should use their discretion to handle the situation in a way that is appropriate for the circumstances. For example, a simple discussion of the legal issues involved in cyberbullying may be enough to deter some youth from future misbehavior. Officers might also talk to parents about their child's conduct and express to them the seriousness of online harassment.

Relatedly, officers can play an essential role in preventing cyberbullying from occurring or getting out of hand in the first place. They can speak to students in classrooms about cyberbullying and online safety issues more broadly in an attempt to discourage them from engaging in risky or unacceptable actions and interactions. They might also speak to parents about local and state laws, so that they are informed and can properly respond if their child is involved in an incident.

For more information:

To learn more about identifying, preventing, and responding to cyberbullying, please visit the Cyberbullying Research Center (www.cyberbullying.us). This information clearinghouse provides research findings, stories, cases, fact sheets, tips and strategies, current news headlines on the topic, online quizzes, a frequently-updated blog, and a number of other helpful resources. It also has downloadable materials for educators, counselors, parents, law enforcement officers, and other youth-serving professionals to use and distribute as needed.

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The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit http://www.cyberbullying.us. © 2010 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin

Cyberbullying Research Summary

Emotional and psychological consequences

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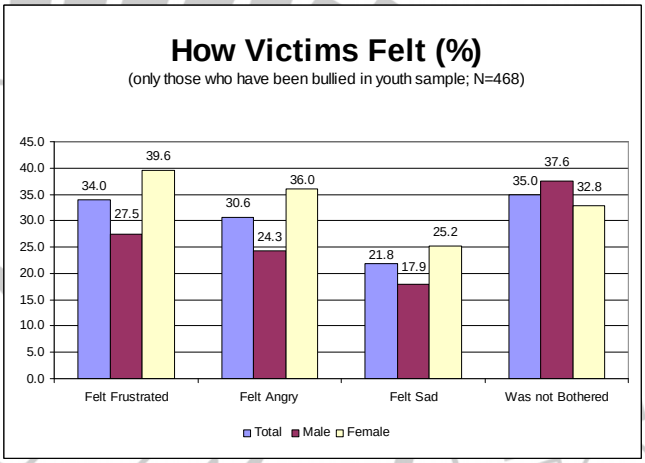
We broadly define *cyberbullying* as *willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices*. Most often, cyberbullying is carried out by using a personal computer or cellular phone to express malicious or mean sentiments to another individual. Another common method involves posting humiliating or embarrassing information about someone in a public online forum (e.g., an online bulletin board, chat room, or web page). Cyberbullying therefore involves harassment or mistreatment carried out by an offender against a victim who is physically distant. Nonetheless, though cyberbullying does not involve personal contact between an offender and victim, it remains psychologically and emotionally damaging to youth.

14 year-old girl from Illinois

It makes me depressed a lot. It affected me for about 3-4 years. I hated being [cyber]bullied. I would come home and just cry. It really hurt.

Cyberbullying has shot to the forefront of agendas in schools and local communities due to the intangible harm that victims suffer. While many students deny the seriousness of name-calling, teasing, and other arguably harmless activities, research suggests otherwise. Indeed, as many as 8% of participants in one study acknowledged that traditionally bullying has affected them to the point where they have attempted suicide, run away, refused to go to school, or been chronically ill. More specifically, in a study of over 3,000 students, one researcher found that 38% of bully victims felt vengeful, 37% were angry, and 24% felt helpless.

These findings are not out of the ordinary. Rather, a significant body of research has detailed the undesirable effects of traditional bullying victimization. For example, male victims tend to feel vengeful and angry while female victims experienced self-pity and depression. According to a 2001 fact sheet on juvenile bullying produced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, victims of schoolyard bullying fear going to school and experience dysphoric feelings of loneliness, humiliation, and insecurity. Moreover, they tend to struggle with poor relationships and have difficulty making emotional and social adjustments. It is reasonable to expect that cyberbullying can similarly lead to such negative outcomes, considering the pain that hateful words can inflict.



In our most recent research project, we found that a significantly greater proportion of females felt frustrated or angry as compared to males. This finding is contrary to expectations as we would expect males to experience such emotions more often than females, while females experience sadness much more often than males. Even so, the emotional responses to cyberbullying are problematic in the sense that they could precipitate other, more serious behavioral outcomes.

General Strain Theory (GST)

Sociologist Robert Agnew proposed that strain or stress experienced by an individual can manifest itself in problematic emotions that lead to deviant behavior. Specifically, three types of strain were proposed:

1) Strain as the actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals

2) Strain as the actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli

3) Strain as the actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli.

These forms of strain often elicit or produce feelings of anger, frustration, or depression - which then can surface as negative behavioral choices. Agnew maintains that individuals who experience strain are more at risk to

engage in deviant or delinquent behaviors. Accordingly, we argue that cyber-bullying victimization can be a potent source of strain among adolescents that can in turn lead to deviant coping responses.

With cyberbullying, students may fear for their safety offline due to harassment and threats conveyed online. At some point, victims may become preoccupied with plotting ways to avoid certain peers while instant messaging or chatting with their friends on the Internet. Indeed, victims might be consumed with avoiding certain cyberbullies whom they actually know in person – either at school, at the bus stop, or in their neighborhood. Whichever the case, when youths are constantly surveilling the landscape of cyberspace or real space to guard against problematic interpersonal encounters, their ability to focus on academics, family matters and responsibilities, and prosocial choices is compromised to some extent. In sum, if students fail to achieve the positively valued goal of personal safety, strain may ensue.

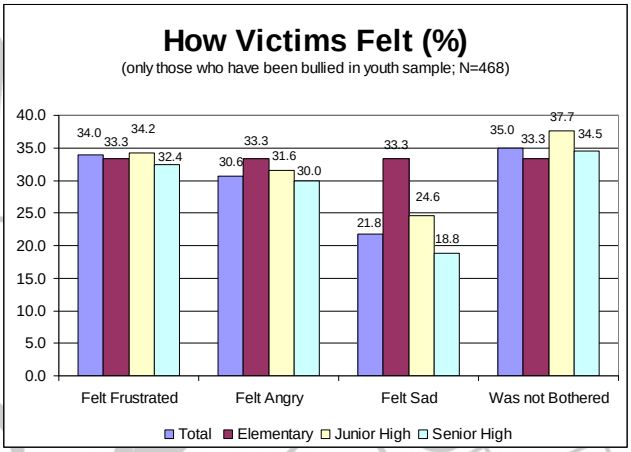
12 year-old girl from Massachusetts:

It lowers my self-esteem. It makes me feel really crappy. It makes me walk around the rest of the day feeling worthless, like no one cares. It makes me very, very depressed.

Another positively-valued goal for school-aged youth is acceptance. Children and adolescents often desperately seek the affirmation and approval of their peers. Cyberbullying, however, stymies that goal through rejection and exclusion. Research has shown that when individuals perceive themselves to be rejected or otherwise socially excluded, a number of emotional, psychological, and behavioral ill effects can result. Consequently, the failure to achieve peer acceptance may also produce strainful feelings. Further, if cyberbullying victimization leads to school, familial, or personal problems that warrant or earn some type of punishment from teachers, parents and guardians, or law enforcement, additional strain may ensue.

Finally, textual attacks by one person (or a group) upon another person through cyberbullying intuitively involves the presentation of negatively valued stimuli. The scope and intensity of negative emotions that may follow is easy to imagine. Agnew argues that adolescents are "…pressured into delinquency by the negative affective states - most notably anger and related emotions…"

This statement aptly describes the actions of a frustrated victim of continuous harassment who ultimately breaks down and either attempts to resolve the strain through some other general antisocial behavior, or seeks specific revenge against his or her aggressor.



Our work has found that many victims of cyberbullying felt depressed, sad, and frustrated. It is interesting to note that a relatively equal percentage of elementary, middle, and high school students felt frustrated and angry, while a notably larger proportion of elementary students felt sad as compared to the other groups.

Conclusion

It is clear from this analysis that the effects of cyberbullying are not limited to hurt feelings that can be easily disregarded. The consequences can be far-reaching, and can permanently damage the psyche of many adolescents. Moreover, General Strain Theory can help researchers, practitioners, and parents better understand the complex emotional and behavioral consequences of cyberbullying. It also can be used to inform policy and practice that seeks to temper the criminogenic effect that strainful emotions may have.

Note: This Research Summary is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article.

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Cyberbullying Research Summary

Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexual Orientation

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Bullying that specifically targets youth and young adults based on their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, though a perennial problem, has garnered significant attention in recent months within the media and from society at large. A clarion call about this problem has been issued by politicians, legislators, celebrities, and others following the recent wave of suicides involving a number of teenagers across the United States. Catapulting this issue to prominence, and stirring the emotions of many, was the suicide of 18-year-old Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi on September 22, 2010. Tyler's last words were shared via a Facebook status update: "jumping off the gw bridge sorry," and apparently prompted by the actions of his roommates. Specifically, they secretly and remotely enabled a webcam in the room where Tyler and a male friend were sharing a private moment – and then broadcasted the streaming video footage across the Internet for all to see and comment on.[1] Many considered this "cyberbullying" – which we define as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."[2] While it was not a typical case it did involve many aspects commonly found in cyberbullying and therefore revived an interest in the link between harassment and sexual orientation.

Hate, Harassment, and Sexual Orientation/Identity

According to an analysis of FBI data by the Southern Poverty Law Center, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) citizens are the minority group most likely to be the target of a violent hate crimes in the United States.[3] Based on data from 1995 to 2008, homosexuals were 2.4 times more likely than Jews and almost 14 times more likely than Latinos to be the victim of a personal hate crime. These data, however, aren't perfect since estimates of particular minority groups in the U.S. are often debated and FBI data relies on hate crimes that are reported, and categorized as such, by the police.

However, violent hate crimes are the exception and not the norm – many more LGBT individuals, adults and youth, are subjected to bullying and harassment. Recent findings from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) based on data from 7,261 middle- and high-school students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2009 sheds light on the frequency and scope of bullying perpetrated against others based on sexual orientation and gender. Their study – composed of youth contacted through community-based groups, online outreach, and targeted advertising on the social net-working sites Facebook and MySpace – found that 9 out of 10 LGBT students has been harassed at school during the past year.[4]

In addition, in their national study assessing the implications of cyberbullying on LGBT youth, Blumenfeld and Cooper[5] found that 54% of respondents reported being cyberbullied within the past three months. These results are largely in line with findings from a nationally representative study commissioned by the National Mental Health Association in 2002 which found that 78% of 12- to 17-year-old students who were gay, or who were perceived to be gay, were teased or bullied in their schools.

In the GLSEN study, 85% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40% reported being physically harassed, and 19% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual identity. Moreover, 64% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 27% reported being physically harassed, and 13% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their gender expression.[4] Finally, 61% of LGBT students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual identity, while 40% felt unsafe due to their gender expression.

Bullying and harassment among this population does not only lead to emotional and psychological pain, it appears to also affect students' participation in, and success at, school. More than four times as many LGBT students missed at least one day of school in the last month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (6.7% of all students compared to 30% of LGBT students missed a day because they were concerned about their safety).[4]

Furthermore, their GPA suffers as well; students who were more frequently harassed due to their sexual identity or gender expression earned almost half a grade lower (2.7 GPA) than students who were less often harassed (3.1 GPA).[4, 6] Depression, lower self-esteem, and higher anxiety were also statistically linked to bullying based on sexual orientation.

Notably, these negative outcomes are not limited to one's adolescent years. Recent research[7] also found that LGBT

youth who transgress societal gender norms suffer victimization that then leads to increased levels of depression and decreased levels of life satisfaction during their young adult years. As might be expected, nationally-based research has also shown that LGBT teens are more than twice as likely to think about or attempt suicide as compared to their heterosexual peers.[8, 9] LGBT students who are bullied also tend towards absenteeism,[10] substance use,[11, 12] risky sexual behaviors, and other mental health difficulties.[13-15]

Within higher education, in their comprehensive study "2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People" Sue Rankin and her colleagues found that academic and social climates on the majority of colleges and universities remain chilly and unwelcoming.[16] The study found that higher education has failed to provide environments for LGBT people to learn, research, and grow professionally and socially to their potential. LGBT students, staff members, faculty members, and administrators were significantly more likely to experience harassment when compared with their heterosexual counterparts (23% compared to 12%) and were seven times more likely to indicate the harassment was based on their sexual identity. They also seriously considered leaving their institution more often, avoided LGBT areas of campus, feared for their physical safety due to sexual identity, and avoided disclosure of sexual identity due to intimidation and fear of negative consequence.

Our Research

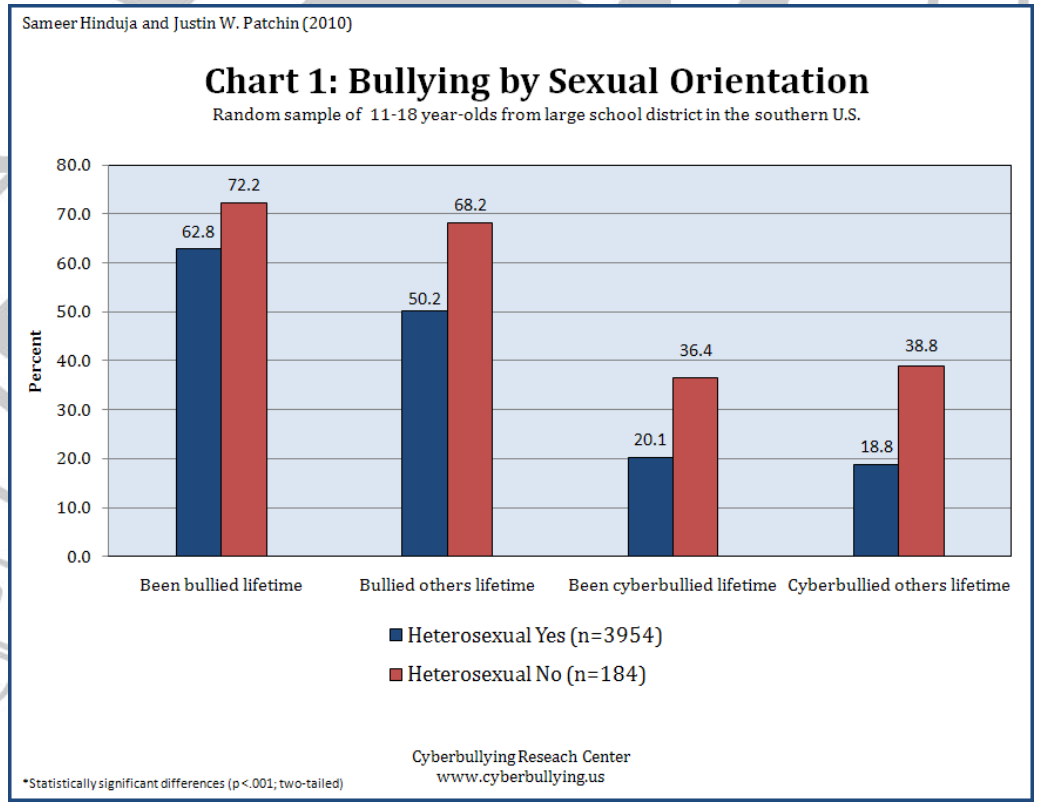
We have explored the intersection of sexual orientation and cyber-bullying in several of our studies. Most recently, in the spring of 2010, we surveyed approximately 4,400 randomly-selected students between the ages of 11 and 18 from a large public school district. In our sample, about 9% of students reported being non-heterosexual or questioning. 6.2% of girls and 2.6% of boys reported being gay, lesbian, or bisexual. And these students were significantly more likely to report being involved in bullying and cyberbullying, both as a target and a bully.

As noted in Chart 1, over 72% of LGBT students reported being the target of a bully at some point in their lifetime compared to 63% of heterosexual students. The difference is even more striking when focusing on cyberbullying: almost twice as many LGBT students reported experiencing cyberbullying compared to heterosexual students (36.1% compared to 20.1%). These differences were also noted in traditional bullying behaviors. LGBT students were significantly more likely to report that they had bullied and/or cyberbullied others during their lifetimes. This likely reflects the close connection between victimization and offending and the overall retaliatory nature of peer harassment. Indeed, one of the most common reasons students give for bullying or cyberbullying others is retaliation – they felt the target deserved to be bullied because of something that had been done to them.[2]

Differences in *recent* experiences with cyberbullying based on sexual orientation are even more striking. For example, 17.3% of LGBT students reported being the victim of cyberbullying in the previous 30 days compared to 6.8% of heterosexual students. And 20.7% of LGBT students admitted to cyberbullying others in the previous 30 days compared to 7.9% of heterosexual students.

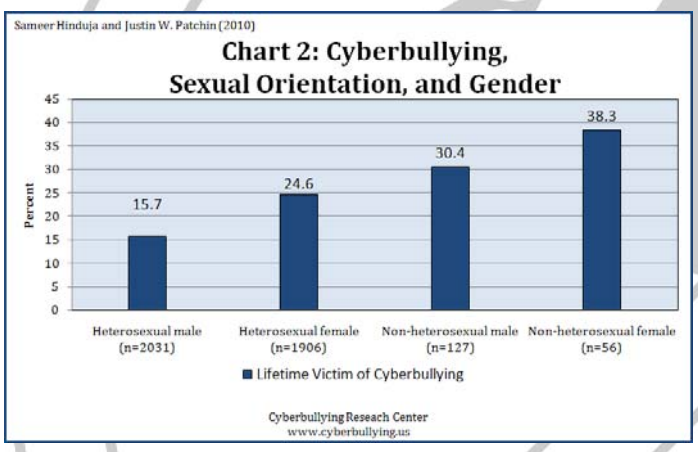
When broken down by sex we find that heterosexual males are the least likely group to have experienced cyberbullying (15.7%) where as non-heterosexual females are the most likely to have been the target (38.3%) (see Chart 2).

Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin (2010)



Bullying, Sexual Orientation, and the Law

Bullying based on sexual orientation is not *expressly* prohibited by federal anti-discrimination laws in America (i.e., Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). The U.S. Department of Education has, however, recently clarified the applicability of Title IX in these cases, as the law prohibits "sex discrimination" if students are harassed "for exhibiting what is perceived as a stereotypical characteristic for their sex, or for failing to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity." The law also prohibits "sexual harassment and gender-based harassment of all students, regardless of the actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity of the harasser or target."[17, 18]



Schools may be violating the civil rights of students who suffer from bullying based on one's sexual orientation if the harassment creates a hostile environment and is not meaningfully addressed by school personnel. Thankfully, many policies in schools that prohibit bullying based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability also include the basis of sexual orientation. With or without a formal policy, school officials should address bullying which is brought to their attention, or about which they reasonably should have known. An investigation must take place, the scope of which will vary depending on the circumstances of each incident. If allegations are proven credible, specific steps must be taken to protect the target and stop the bullying.

Preventing Bullying and Cyberbullying Based on Sexual Orientation

A number of initiatives are essential to assist, affirm, and safeguard sexual minority youth within the school environment, and do not require a great amount of time or resources to implement.[19, 20] First, explicit policies must be in place that prohibit and specify sanctions for any student who teases, threatens, excludes, or otherwise mistreats another individual based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.[21] The GLSEN research from 2009 has shown that students at schools with such policies in place overheard less homophobic comments and experienced less victimization related to their sexual orientation. Moreover, they were more likely to seek help from staff, and more likely to see staff step in to help victims.[4]

Workshops for the entire school community that sensitize and educate staff on the needs and experiences of LGBT students can also preempt some of the problems that stem from responses by well-meaning but misinformed adults.[22] Creating and publicizing the availability of counseling and support from specially-trained personnel on campus will help to embolden fearful youth to seek assistance.[23] Pointing out and making a negative example of gender-biased speech or conduct, homophobic jokes or epithets, and ignorant references which might offend any minority group is also crucial in building and maintaining an inclusive and safe environment for all students.[24]

Additionally, having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) formally set up on campus appears to lead to less victimization and a greater sense of belonging at school.[6, 19, 25] Also essential is the presence of administrators, teachers, and staff who are openly supportive of (and knowledgeable about) LGBT perspectives and issues, and make themselves available as a resource to students.[22, 26] Moreover, positive representations of LGBT people and events in classroom discussions, school-wide assemblies, library materials, curriculums, posters and signage, and through other mediums champions the inherent value and unique contributions of all people.[22, 26-28] Finally, cultivating inclusiveness in sports, clubs, and other social activities promotes a climate that not only accepts but embraces diversity and empowers questioning youth to safely figure out who they are.[4, 27] We strongly encourage implementation of these suggested practices, and believe they will lead to measurable improvements in the psychosocial well-being of the LGBT adolescents under your care at school.

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The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit http://www.cyberbullying.us. © 2011 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin