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Erika Mantz

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Media Relations

June 03, 2015

Cyberbullying Less Emotionally Harmful to Kids Than Traditional In-Person Harassment, UNH Study Finds

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Contrary to popular belief, cyberbullying that starts and stays online is no more emotionally harmful to youngsters than harassment that only occurs in-person and may actually be less disturbing because it's likelier to be of shorter duration and not involve significant power imbalances, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association.

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire analyzed data from the Technology Harassment Victimization Study, funded by the National Institute of Justice. They focused on telephone interviews conducted in 2013-2014 with 791 American youth ages 10-20 (49 percent male). Of these, 34 percent reported 311 harassment incidents in the prior year. Among the harassment incidents, 54 percent were in-person only; 15 percent involved technology only; and 31 percent involved a combination of the two.

Although technology-only incidents were more likely to involve large numbers of witnesses, they were least likely to involve multiple perpetrators, the study found. Also, while technology-only incidents were more likely to involve strangers or anonymous perpetrators, this appeared to be less distressing to youth than harassment by schoolmates and other known acquaintances.

"Technology-only incidents were less likely than in-person only incidents to result in injury, involve a social power differential and to have happened a series of times," said lead researcher Kimberly Mitchell, who is with the Crimes against Children Research Center at UNH. "Mixed episodes, those that involved both in-person and technology elements, were more likely than technology-only episodes to involve perpetrators who knew embarrassing things about the victim, happen a series of times, last for one month or longer, involve physical injury and start out as joking before becoming more serious. It is these mixed episodes that appear to be the most distressing to youth."

Many researchers and advocates have assumed that technology-based bullying would be particularly damaging to victims because online harassers can post pictures or videos, anonymously and to large audiences, and because the aggression can reach the targets any time of the day or night. However, the new findings suggest that technology by itself does not necessarily increase the seriousness and level of distress associated with peer harassment. "Instead, data from this study indicated that factors such as duration, power imbalance, injury, sexual content, involvement of multiple perpetrators, and hate/bias comments are some of the key factors that increase youth distress," said co-author Heather Turner.

The researchers said the survey was designed in a way that allowed them to gather extensive details about separate harassment incidents and to examine new technology as one aspect of many

possible aggravating incident features. Research on cyberbullying to date has mostly been conducted separate from or parallel to research about in-person bullying, they said.

“We believe that focusing on harassment incidents that involve both in-person and technology elements should be a priority for educators and prevention experts who are trying to identify and prevent the most serious and harmful bullying,” Mitchell said.

The study is published in APA’s journal *Psychology of Violence*. Full text of the article is available from the APA Public Affairs Office and at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/vio-a0039317.pdf>.

EDITORS: Lead researcher Kimberly Mitchell is available at kimberly.mitchell@unh.edu or (603) 862-4533.

Media Contact: | 202-336-5700 | APA Public Affairs Office

Secondary Contact: [Erika Mantz](#) | 603-862-1567 | UNH Media Relations | [@unhnews](#)

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