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Victims of online bullying may be more likely to be depressed

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A study released Tuesday shows that as bullying has moved beyond the schoolyard and on to Facebook pages, online chat groups and cellphone text messages, its victims are feeling more hopeless and depressed.

"Traditional bullying is more face-to-face," said Ronald J. Iannotti, principal investigator for the study, published online in the Journal of Adolescent Health. It says that students targeted by cyber-bullies, who may not always identify themselves, "may be more likely to feel isolated, dehumanized or helpless at the time of the attack."

The study, by the National Institutes of Health, is based on surveys of more than 7,000 American schoolchildren. It offers a troubling portrait of the latest incarnation of an eternal problem. But researchers also say that traditional bullying and cyber-bullying are not necessarily distinct events and that one often flows into the other.

The issue has drawn increased attention since Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old who had moved from Ireland to Massachusetts, hanged herself in January after she reportedly was tormented verbally, on Facebook and through text messages. The day of her suicide, a harasser reportedly pummeled her with a beverage can as she walked home from school. Prosecutors have charged six fellow students in her case and raised questions about the actions of school officials who knew about incidents of abuse.

The results of the new report did not surprise some educators. Heather Applegate, supervisor of diagnostic and prevention services in Loudoun County public schools, said, "With cyber-bullying, you can't get away from it. In order to get away, you have to stop using social networking or stop using your cellphone."

Nationally, experts disagree on the prevalence - and definition - of cyber-bullying, said John Palfrey, faculty director of Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Palfrey said that as more of teens' social lives happen digitally, "the good comes with the bad."

The new study follows previous research by the same authors that showed cyber-bullying is most prevalent in middle school, from grades 6 to 8 - a time when, Iannotti noted, children are vulnerable and struggling with issues of self-definition.

The earlier study found that nearly 14 percent of U.S. sixth- through 10th-graders had been involved in at least one cyber-bullying incident in the previous two months - as an offender, victim or both. More than 20 percent reported physical bullying in that period, and more than 50 percent reported verbal bullying or social harassment. "Everything you've heard about middle school is true," Iannotti said.

Boys were more likely to cyber-bully, and girls were more likely to be cyber-victims. But for those targeted by such behavior, the tendency toward depression was similar, regardless of sex.

Bullying is linked to lower levels of academic achievement, well-being and social development. It can also affect the future. "There is a lot of evidence that psychological problems in adolescence can persist into adulthood," Iannotti said.

The study found that those involved in bullying - in any way - were at greater risk for depression than those who kept clear of it. This was true whether the behavior included physical violence, verbal taunts, social exclusion or cyber-aggression.

With traditional bullying methods, depression levels were highest among both the victim and what researchers call "bully-victims," youths who sometimes act as bullies but are also sometimes victims. But with cyber-bullying, victims faced significantly greater levels of depression than their attackers or students who were both bully and victim.

The study, whose lead author was Jing Wang, also reports that levels of depression rose as bullying became more frequent. The data used for the study come from 2005-06. Researchers say they expect that the problem will look more severe as they examine subsequent sets of data, from years when texting and social networking were even more popular.

Wang said the previous research found an association between parental involvement and less bullying of all forms.

"Involvement of schools and parents is really important," Iannotti said. "It's really got to be a community effort - working with teachers, administrators, parents, and working with kids to improve their social skills so these kinds of things don't happen."

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