

the measures used to record levels of distress during incidents were limited when compared to standard trauma measures.

Implications for Future Research

This research makes an important contribution as one of the first national studies to provide detailed incident-level data on the role of online technology in youth harassment and to explore the connection between harassment victims' experiences and prior victimizations across a range of domains. These findings point to several important areas for future inquiry.

First, the finding that certain incident features (e.g., physical injury and the victim's or bystander's ability or willingness to stop the incident) and perpetrator characteristics (e.g., social power differential, the relationship between the victim and aggressor and the involvement of alcohol or drugs) correlated more strongly to emotional harm than the use of technology speaks to the important role of context. Future research may reveal how these factors play out in the daily victimization experiences of youth.

Second, the fact that this study examined harassment at the incident level as well as the participant level provided a unique vantage point. The use of a broad range of methods and approaches is required to advance the science. Yet, since this approach only collected data on as many as two incidents, detailed information was missing from those youth who experience high numbers of harassment incidents and it may not capture all "mixed harassment" experiences if they were not identified as being part of the same incident. Next steps may be to examine repeated victimization experiences that involve different perpetrators, within and across domains, to further explore the complexity of these relationships and the impact on youth experiences.

Third, the range of bystander behaviors reported across types of incidents suggests that it is not useful to think of bystander behavior as simple; it can be quite complex and contradictory. More research on the impact of a range of bystander behaviors, both positive and negative, on youth outcomes may guide the development of more useful intervention and prevention efforts.

Fourth, the findings that link prior polyvictimization to the increased likelihood of youth experiencing mixed-

harassment incidents is consistent with previous research on populations that experience polyvictimization.

Longitudinal research could explore the developmental pathways associated with or resulting in a range of victimization experiences over time. This type of research may identify potential interventions where victims can learn how to prevent or reduce the impact of these incidents in the future.

Finally, understanding the role that gender, ethnicity and other relevant demographic variables have in these processes would provide valuable insights. Future work with more specific subsamples could explore some of the preliminary findings related to gender and ethnicity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

There has been a great amount of public anxiety around the use of technology in peer harassment and bullying incidents (i.e., cyberbullying). Experts have expressed concern that technology-based harassment and bullying could cause greater harm than traditional forms because content can be transmitted anonymously, involve many other youth quickly and reach victims anywhere and at any time.^{6,9,10,21} Findings from the Technology Harassment Victimization study are both reassuring and a cause for concern. It is reassuring that technology-only peer harassment is the least distressing kind of harassment for youth and the least likely to involve features that are assumed to amplify harm.^{6,8,10,21} Technology-only incidents were easier to stop than in-person-only incidents and were less likely to involve other harassment characteristics that research has shown to be related to greater distress, such as multiple perpetrators and power imbalances.²²

The picture becomes more complex, however, when considering the impact of mixed-harassment incidents, which include both in-person and online technology elements. These incidents were the most distressing for their victims and shared many features with in-person-only harassment, such as repeated harassment over time and the involvement of victims and aggressors in deeper relationships. These findings do not mean that technology-only incidents are not sometimes serious — only that, when mixed-harassment environments are in play, the likelihood of more serious consequences is increased.

Mixed-Harassment Incidents, Young Victims and Their Peers

Youth who experienced mixed forms of harassment said they could not get away from the harassment because they were being victimized across multiple environments at school, at home and with online technology. The perpetrators were often current or past friends or romantic partners and thus more likely to know personal details about their victims. Texting was the predominant type of technology used in mixed-harassment incidents,¹⁹ suggesting that these interactions were more direct and private than communication through websites or social networking pages.

Even after controlling for a wide range of possible aggravating factors, mixed-harassment incidents remained significantly more distressing for youth than either in-person or technology-only harassment. It is possible that when harassment incidents happen in multiple contexts, the perpetrators have more animosity toward their victims and the harassment is more personal or meaningful in ways that are difficult to measure. It is telling that the types of emotional reactions from victims of mixed-harassment incidents were most often anger, sadness and lack of trust,¹⁹ and the incidents were marked by more intense, personal and complex negative interactions that had high emotional salience for those involved.

Peer harassment and bullying typically occur in the presence of other youth,^{23,24} and many prevention programs focus their educational efforts on bystanders to shift social norms and provide youth with the skills to support victims.²⁵ To be successful, however, prevention education must address and provide solutions for the various ways that bystanders react during and after incidents, different types of incidents, all levels of severity and in different contexts, including emerging contexts. The current study has attempted to address these issues.

Bystanders play an active role in 80 percent of harassment incidents and can offer to help or support the victim, watch what happens, leave the scene or, much less often, join in the harassment. There were no clear differences in how bystanders reacted in terms of technology involvement, but mixed-response incidents had the highest rates of bystander activity, both positive and negative, suggesting that some types of harassment are more likely to draw involvement from extended peer groups.

Youth experiencing mixed-harassment incidents are the most likely to have been polyvictims: prior victims of 12 or more types of victimization. Not only do polyvictims experience the highest negative emotional impact from harassment, but they are also more likely to have elevated rates of delinquency, trauma and lifetime adversity.

Conclusion

The results of this study appear to indicate that — among mixed-, in-person- and technology-only peer harassment incidents — technology-only harassment is the least distressing to young victims. This finding does not mean that harassment involving the use of technology alone cannot be severe or damaging. However, the data from this study and others suggest that focusing solely on victimization involving the use of technology as a research priority topic could distract educators and policymakers from a deeper understanding of the types of peer victimization that are actually the most harmful to youth.

What the data clearly reveal is that mixed-peer harassment — involving both in-person- and technology-based elements — is the most traumatic for victims, especially those who have been victimized in multiple ways in the past and are facing numerous stressors in their present lives. Finding ways to prevent and successfully intervene in mixed and in-person peer harassment incidents is a productive focus for future research.

For More Information

This bulletin was adapted from Mitchell, K.J., L.M. Jones, H.A. Turner, A. Shattuck and J. Wolak, “The Role of Technology in Peer Harassment: Does It Amplify Harm for Youth?,” *Psychology of Violence* 6 (2) (2016): 193-204, <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/vio-a0039317.pdf>.

For more information about the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV), visit the Crimes against Children Research Center website, <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc>, and access the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s NatSCEV publication series at <http://www.ojjdp.gov/publications/PubResults.asp?sei=94>.

For more information about the Technology Harassment Victimization study, download the final report: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/249003.pdf>.

Endnotes

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