

# The Role of Technology in Youth Harassment Victimization



# THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN YOUTH HARASSMENT VICTIMIZATION

This bulletin discusses key findings from the Technology Harassment Victimization study that the National Institute of Justice sponsored. It is a follow-up study to the second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV II) that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention sponsored. The study, conducted between December 2013 and March 2014, examined technology-involved harassment within the context of other types of youth victimization and risk factors to improve current policy and practice regarding the issue.

## Background

### Youth, Technology and Harassment Victimization

The first, second and third Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS-1, YISS-2 and YISS-3) were comprehensive national assessments that examined dynamic changes in youth Internet use and victimization patterns over time. Results of YISS-1 (conducted in 2000)<sup>1</sup> revealed that six percent of young Internet users experienced online harassment in the previous year.

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YISS-2 (conducted in 2005)<sup>2</sup> revealed that nine percent of respondents experienced online harassment during the previous year, and that number rose to 11 percent in the 2010 YISS-3 results.<sup>3</sup> The data suggest that greater occurrences of negative interactions between girls and more social network website communications predominantly drove the increase.<sup>1</sup> Because technology-based harassment rates are lower than other forms of youth victimization, the experiences that youth have with technology must be considered in conjunction with broader patterns of peer and sibling victimization, child maltreatment, conventional crime, sexual victimization, witnessing and indirect victimization, and other adverse life events to fully understand the causes, nature and impact of the problem.

Previous studies that measured online harassment and other peer victimization among the same sample all found that online harassment and cyberbullying occur at lower rates than in-person harassment and bullying.<sup>2-4</sup> For example, in 2007, about 32 percent of students between the ages of 12 and 18 reported bullying victimization at school during the academic year, compared to four percent who reported experiencing cyberbullying.<sup>4</sup> However, another study found that 64 percent of youth who reported online harassment in the previous year did not report experiencing bullying

in school.<sup>5</sup> Some experts suggest that the anonymity of technology encourages bad behavior because people are not face-to-face with their targets and that, perhaps, online perpetrators have no accountability, so they engage in rude or harassing behavior when they would not typically have done so in person.<sup>6-9</sup> Such findings raise critical questions about the nature of technology-related victimization and its similarities to, differences from and co-occurrence with other peer victimization behaviors. If technology facilitates peer harassment and bullying through anonymity and remoteness,<sup>10,11</sup> it is unclear why equal or greater levels of this behavior are not being observed in comparison to in-person harassment or bullying behavior.

Another deficit in the empirical literature involves documenting the emotional impact of technology-related harassment in comparison to the emotional impact of in-person harassment. Some suggest that the impact of harassment involving new technology can be worse because online harassers can post, comment or create pictures or videos that are available to widespread audiences.<sup>8,10</sup> In addition, the aggression can reach targets anywhere and at any time.<sup>8</sup> Online harassment can be more visible and permanent, and other aggravating features may also be present. For example, almost one in four perpetrators of online harassment are reportedly 18 years of age or older.<sup>12</sup> Youth who are harassed online by adults are significantly more likely to report distress because of the experience.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, technology may provide an emotional distance that lessens the impact compared to in-person verbal or physical aggression. Without further research, the emotional toll different forms of harassment have on an individual remains unclear.

## A New Approach to Studying Harassment Victimization

One issue complicating the understanding of technology-facilitated harassment is that no research exists examining the intersection of technology-based harassment and offline peer victimization at the incident level — for example, data on how often technology-based harassment is an extension of in-person harassment (i.e., school, work or other locations). Although some harassment happens solely through the use of technology, increasing numbers of victims know their aggressors from school or neighborhood contact.<sup>1</sup>

Considering how much technology currently infuses youth communication and peer interaction, it is not surprising that peer problems in school spill over into the online environment.<sup>13</sup> In addition, a notable proportion of technology harassment victims are likely to be bullied in school. For these youth, technology-based harassment may be a direct extension of other forms of victimization.

## Methodology

The current study surveyed a national sample of youth to (a) define technology-involved harassment incidents and identify their adverse consequences; (b) explore the role that harassment characteristics (e.g., duration and relationship with the aggressor) have on the impact of technology-involved harassment; (c) assess how often and how deeply bystanders are involved in technology-based youth harassment and (d) determine whether polyvictimized youth, who have experienced 12 or more types of victimization in their life, are at particular risk for technology-based harassment.

## Participants

The Technology Harassment Victimization study is a telephone survey that drew its sample from a subset of households that completed a previous survey, the second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence in 2011-12. The Technology Harassment Victimization study included questions about technology use, perpetration of harassment, bystander experiences, psychosocial characteristics and general victimization history. Conducted from December 2013 to March 2014, the study targeted the subset of NatSCEV II youth who were ages 8-17 at baseline ( $n = 2,197$ ). A total of 791 (36 percent of the eligible sample pool) interviews were completed with youth ages 10-20 for the Technology Harassment Victimization study. Sample weights were adjusted for differential attrition in wave 2 using age, race/ethnicity, household income, number of children in the household, parent demographics, and child's victimization and delinquent behavior as determined in wave 1. The final study methodology report contains more details about wave 2 methodology, nonresponse analysis and weight construction.<sup>1</sup>

Caregivers provided demographic information, including the child's gender (49 percent male), age ( $mean = 14.7$ ),

## HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Under the leadership of then-Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder in June 1999, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) created the Safe Start Initiative to prevent and reduce the impact of children's exposure to violence. As a part of this initiative and with a growing need to document the full extent of children's exposure to violence, OJJDP launched the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV I) with the support of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CDC partnered with OJJDP to support the assessment of safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments as protective factors for vulnerable youth.

NatSCEV I was the first national incidence and prevalence study to comprehensively examine the extent and nature of children's exposure to violence across all ages, settings and timeframes. Conducted between January and May 2008, it measured the past-year and lifetime exposure to violence for children age 17 and younger across several major categories: conventional crime, child maltreatment, victimization by peers and siblings, sexual victimization, witnessing and indirect victimization (including exposure to community violence and family violence), school violence and threats, and Internet victimization. This survey marked the first attempt to measure children's exposure to violence in the home, school and community across all age groups from one month to age 17, and the first attempt to measure the cumulative exposure to violence over the child's lifetime.

The survey asked children and their adult caregivers about the incidents of violence that children suffered and witnessed themselves and also about other related crime and threat exposures, such as theft or burglary from a child's household, being in a school that was the target of a credible bomb threat and being in a war zone or an area where ethnic violence occurred. OJJDP directed the development of the study, and the Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire designed and conducted the research. It provided data on the full extent of violence in the daily lives of children.

NatSCEV I documented the incidence and prevalence of children's exposure to a broad array of violent experiences across a wide developmental spectrum. The research team asked follow-up questions about specific events, including where the exposure to violence occurred, whether injury resulted, how often the child was exposed to a specific type of violence, and the child's relationship to the perpetrator and (when the child witnessed violence) the victim.

In addition, the survey documented differences in exposure to violence across gender, race, socioeconomic status, family structure, region, urban/rural residence and developmental stage of the child; specified how different forms of violent victimization "cluster" or co-occur; identified individual-, family- and

race/ethnicity (58.8 percent white non-Hispanic, 12.6 percent black non-Hispanic, 8.1 percent other race non-Hispanic and 20.6 percent Hispanic any race), and socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is a composite based on the sum of the highest standardized household income and standardized parental education scores, which was then restandardized. Family structure was categorized into children living with two biological or adoptive parents (53.1 percent), one biological parent and a partner (8.6 percent), a single biological parent (34.1 percent), or other nonparent caregiver such as a grandparent or foster parent (4.2 percent).

## Procedure

The research team mailed an advance letter, reply form and \$5 cash to the 2,127 sample households. Interviewers called the households if they did not mail back the forms. Interviews with 791 respondents were completed; the average time to complete a survey was 58 minutes.

Interviewers used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system. After briefly surveying the parent or guardian, the interviewers asked the parent or guardian and the child for their consent to proceed to the child portion of the interview. The interviewers sent youth respondents who completed the survey a \$25 check.

The interviewers completed most wave 2 parental interviews (96 percent) with the same parent or guardian who participated in wave 1. A clinical member of the research team trained in telephone crisis counseling recontacted respondents who disclosed serious threats or ongoing victimization during the interview and stayed in contact with the respondent until the situation was appropriately addressed locally. The institutional review board of the University of New Hampshire authorized all procedures and ensured that they complied with the confidentiality guidelines that the U.S. Department of Justice has set forth.

## Measures

### Harassment Screening Questions

Peer harassment was the key measure in this study. The researchers purposely used a broad definition of peer harassment to capture a range of harassment experiences. Incidents included components of standard

(Continued on page 4)



## HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE (Continued from page 3)

community-level predictors of violence exposure among children; examined associations between levels/types of exposure to violence and children's mental and emotional health; and assessed the extent to which children disclose incidents of violence to various individuals and the nature and source of assistance or treatment provided (if any).

In 2012, in response to its solicitation for research proposals on children exposed to violence with identified focus areas of polyvictimization and Internet harassment, the National Institute of Justice received an application from CCRC that was funded through a competitive review process to conduct the Technology Harassment Victimization study. Capitalizing on the existence of NatSCEV, the Technology Harassment Victimization study followed up with a subsample of NatSCEV II to provide an in-depth exploration of the nature and consequences of technology-involved harassment, the impact of a range of incident-level characteristics, and the role of bystanders. In addition, a unique strength of the study was the ability to use the longitudinal nature of the sample and the existence of earlier data on polyvictimization and other relevant experiences to examine the relationship between technology-based harassment and other forms of victimization.

cyberbullying but were not limited to cyberbullying. The interviewers asked the youth whether they had experienced in-person or technology-involved harassment from nonfamily peers during the past year. Some specific types of harassment that the interviewers prompted the youth to think about included:

- Someone calling them mean names, making fun of them or teasing them in a hurtful way.
- Someone excluding or ignoring them or getting others to turn against them.
- Someone spreading false rumors about them or sharing something that was meant to be private (such as something they wrote or a private picture or video of them).
- Someone hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving or threatening to physically hurt them.

If a youth had experienced such harassment in the past year, the interviewer asked the youth to identify *as many as two unique incidents* for detailed follow-up questioning. The interviewers used the following hierarchy for selecting incidents:

- If at least two technology-involved harassment events were reported, details were gathered about both (most recent time and worst or most serious time).
- If one technology-involved harassment event and one nontechnology-involved harassment event were reported, details were gathered on both.
- If no technology-involved events but one or more in-person harassment events were reported, details were gathered on as many as two of those events (most recent time and worst or most serious time).

## Confirming Technology Involvement

Once they identified unique incidents, the interviewers asked the youth respondents a detailed series of follow-up questions about each specific harassment incident. The researchers designed all of the questions specifically for the Technology Harassment Victimization study. Follow-up questions confirmed the involvement of technology and what types of technology were used. Specifically, youth were asked whether the incident happened (a) when they were at school or on school grounds; (b) on the way to or from school, either on the bus or while walking; (c) at home; (d) at work; (e) at a friend's home; (f) in a car or (g) online or texting. The survey permitted respondents to have multiple responses to each question.

Next, interviewers asked the youth what kinds of technology were involved in the harassment incidents. Multiple responses were permitted, including (a) email; (b) cell phones; (c) text messages; (d) instant messages; (e) social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter; (f) a gaming website and (g) some other type of technology.

Finally, youth were asked to choose a statement that best described the incident. Response options included (a) it started online and stayed online; (b) it started online and then moved offline to other places like school or work; (c) it started offline someplace, such as school or work, before it moved online or (d) it started online and offline at about the same time. The interviewers recoded incidents, changing the category from nontechnology involved to technology involved (or vice versa), if necessary, to reconcile any discrepancy between the technology and nontechnology harassment screening responses and the follow-up questions.

## Incident Characteristics

Through a series of detailed incident follow-up questions, interviewers asked the youth respondents about the perpetrator(s) of the harassment, including the number of perpetrators, their ages, genders and their relationship to the respondent. The interviewers also asked about the duration and location of the event; the type of harassment (e.g., verbal, exclusion, rumors or physical); aggravating features (e.g., sexual elements, weapons use, physical injury, social power differentials, bias content and mutual harassment); bystander involvement; and disclosure (whether the youth told anyone what happened and whom). The interviewers also asked youth a series of questions to assess the emotional impact of the incident — specifically, whether it made them feel upset, afraid, embarrassed, worried, angry, sad, untrusting or unsafe. Responses to each of these items were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). The researchers constructed dummy variables for each item and coded them as 1 if the youth rated the impact at 4 or 5 on the scale. They also created a total emotional impact score, which combined scale responses on each of the eight items for each incident.

## Other Key Measures

The research team assessed *victimization history* using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ),<sup>14-16</sup> a comprehensive inventory of childhood victimization. The questionnaire includes 53 items that assess a broad range of victimizations across five modules: conventional crime (e.g., having something stolen), child maltreatment (e.g., being physically abused), peer and sibling victimization

(e.g., being hit by other kids), sexual victimization (e.g., being forced to do something sexual) and witnessing violence (e.g., seeing parents hit each other). Each question refers to a specific form of victimization (e.g., aggravated assault or dating violence). The specific items used to screen for these victimization types have been published elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Youth who experienced 12 or more kinds of victimization over their lifetime were defined as polyvictims.

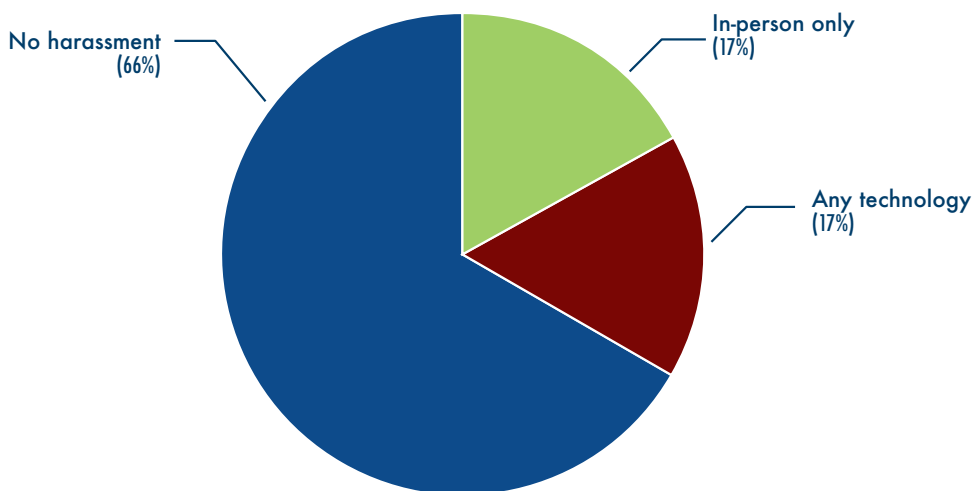
The researchers used 15 items to measure *adversity due to nonviolent traumatic events and chronic stressors*, 13 of which they took from a scale that Turner and colleagues developed and two of which they constructed for NatSCEV II.<sup>17,18</sup> Nonviolent traumatic events include serious illnesses, accidents and parental imprisonment. Chronic stressors include substance abuse by family members and homelessness. The interviewers asked the youth respondents whether each adversity happened in their lifetime. They used the average score across items in the current analyses, with higher scores reflecting more adversity.

## Highlights of Study Results

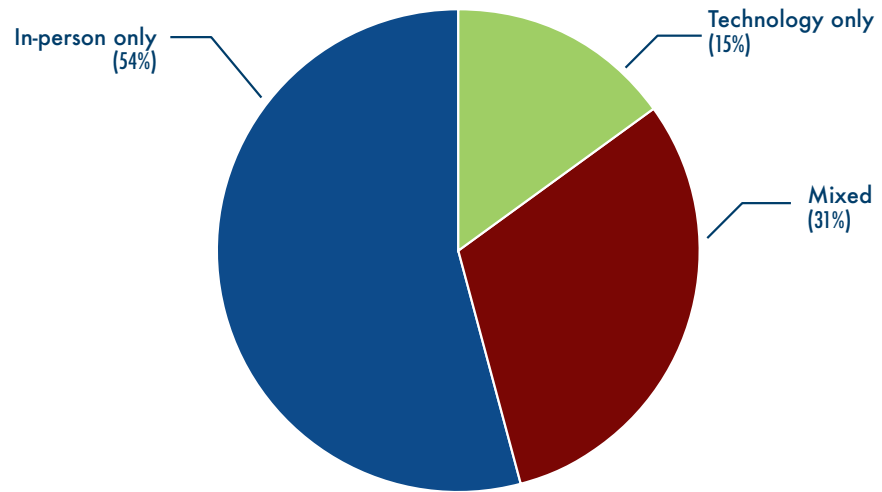
### Harassment Prevalence and Technology Involvement

Of the 791 respondents, 230 (34 percent) reported 311 unique harassment incidents in the past year (see figure 1).<sup>19</sup> Of youth reporting harassment incidents, 45 percent were ages 10-12 at the time of the wave 2 interview, 23 percent were ages 13-15, 22 percent were 16-17, and 10

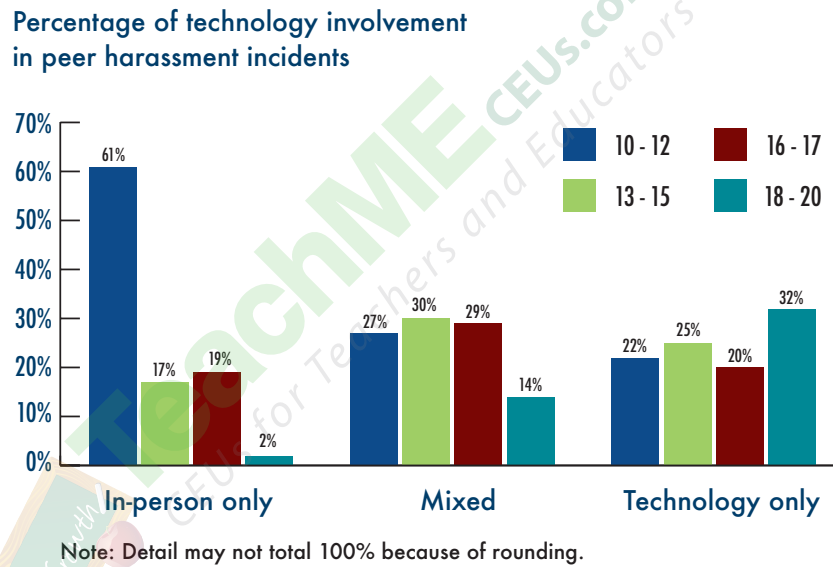
FIGURE 1. Prevalence of Past-Year Harassment



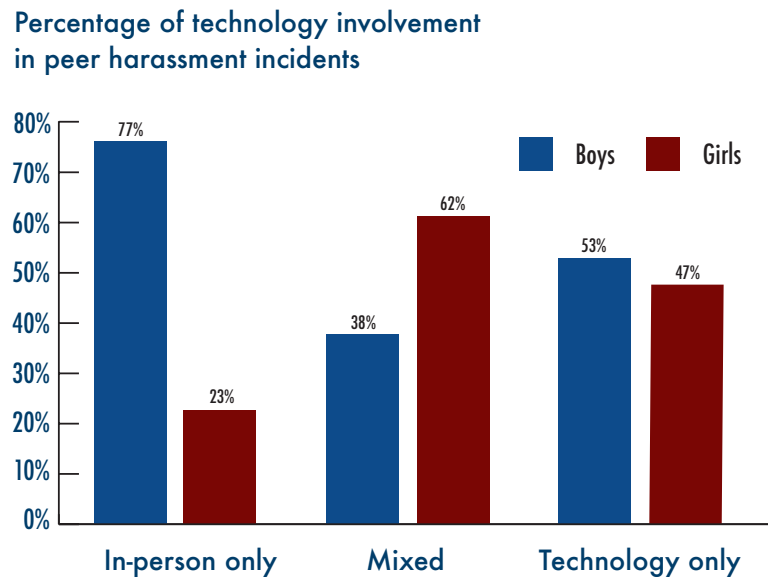
**FIGURE 2.** Rates of Technology Involvement in Harassment Incidents



**FIGURE 3.** Percentage of Technology Involvement in Peer Harassment Incidents by Age Group



**FIGURE 4.** Percentage of Technology Involvement in Peer Harassment Incidents by Gender



## VICTIMS' RESPONSES TO AN INCIDENT OF HARASSMENT

Before asking the harassed youth a series of specific details about an incident, interviewers asked them to briefly describe, in their own words, what happened. Below are examples of the victims' responses.

### In-person-only harassment incidents

- **12-year-old male:** "We were eating lunch and one of the kids sitting nearby me called me something. Some of the kids that heard it joined in and kept rubbing it in and making it worse."
- **11-year-old female:** "Someone said something that was not true and spread it around the school, and then people started looking at me in a funny way."
- **15-year-old female:** "We were taking pictures for the school play and a girl who didn't like me pushed me on the floor in front of the play director because she wanted to be in the middle. I had a bruised elbow and I got a restraining order against her because of it."
- **10-year-old male:** "I was playing outside with my friends and big girls came over here and called me names, hit me, kicked me, and literally tried to kill me, like pushing me in the road."

### Technology-only harassment incidents

- **12-year-old female:** "This girl got very jealous of me, and she didn't like me having other friends, and she started calling me all these names, and I just blocked her from Facebook and other things. This happened two times. She got on her grandma's Facebook and was messaging me that she wasn't friends with me but she was messaging me."
- **18-year-old male:** "My ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend sent a text message threatening to beat me up."
- **14-year-old female:** "It was on Instagram. There were two girls, and the girls were being rude, and they were calling me names and said I was ugly. I blocked them."

### Mixed-harassment incidents

- **15-year-old female:** "I got in a fight last year and people keep posting it on Facebook. The comments made on there are ridiculously rude. I got cut down and called fat, was told fat people should not fight a skinny person and that I should be ashamed of myself."
- **19-year-old female:** "I had two girls who were, at one point, friends. They started talking about my boyfriend, saying things that weren't true."

(Continued on page 8)

percent were 18-20. Sixty-one percent of harassment victims were boys and 60 percent were white and non-Hispanic.

More than half (64 percent) of such youth lived in a household of average socioeconomic status, 45 percent lived with both biological parents and 35 percent lived with a single parent.

Seventeen percent ( $n = 137$ ) of all respondents and 46 percent of victims ( $n = 230$ ) reported at least one technology-involved harassment incident, amounting to 148 unique incidents. All harassment incidents were in three mutually exclusive groups: (a) in-person only, no technology involved (54 percent,  $n = 136$ ); (b) technology involved, no in-person elements (15 percent,  $n = 58$ ); and (c) mixed harassment, involving both in-person and technology elements (31 percent,  $n = 117$ ) (see figure 2).

Youth reporting in-person-only harassment incidents were significantly younger than those in the other two categories (see figure 3). Technology-only incidents involved a similar number of boys and girls, but more girls were in mixed-harassment incidents (see figure 4). No significant differences emerged across groups in terms of race and ethnicity, family structure or socioeconomic status.

## Harassment Incident Characteristics to Predict Emotional Harm

The researchers identified specific harassment incident characteristics most likely to result in emotional harm (e.g., upset, afraid, angry, sad). The average total emotional impact score was lowest for technology-only incidents ( $mean = 15.3$ ,  $standard\ error = 0.9$ ) and highest for mixed incidents ( $mean = 23.1$ ,  $standard\ error = 1.2$ ). Compared to in-person-only incidents, emotional impact scores for victims were significantly lower for technology-only incidents ( $p < .05$ ) and significantly higher for mixed-harassment incidents ( $p < .05$ ). It follows that emotional impact scores were significantly higher for youth victimized in mixed-harassment incidents than for youth harassed in technology-only incidents ( $p < .001$ ).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, mixed-harassment incidents produced the highest negative emotional impact. Other features that increased the likelihood of emotional harm included physical



## VICTIMS' RESPONSES TO AN INCIDENT OF HARASSMENT (Continued from page 7)

They were prank-calling me and my boyfriend for a few years. They were saying I was pregnant. They made an Instagram page calling me names, and they said I made the page, even though it was kind of fake. They made it look like I made the fake page.”

- **16-year-old female:** “I have a stalker ex-boyfriend, and he likes to bother my whole family. He is a hacker, so he can hack into all my friends’ accounts, and pretends to be my friend, but I can tell.”

injury, exclusion, a perpetrator who was using alcohol or drugs, a social power differential between the victim and perpetrator and the perpetrator being a schoolmate or acquaintance. The ability to stop the harassment reduced the likelihood of a negative emotional impact. Girls and white, non-Hispanic youth were more likely to report a negative emotional impact from harassment incidents.

### The Role of Youth Bystanders

Eighty percent of the 311 peer harassment incidents involved the presence of at least one youth bystander in addition to the respondent and the perpetrator.<sup>20</sup> Sixty-five percent involved one to 10 bystanders, 24 percent involved 11 to 25 bystanders, and 12 percent involved more than 25 bystanders. There were no significant differences between the groups of one or more bystanders, but 26 or more bystanders witnessed 20 percent of technology-only incidents, compared to three percent of in-person incidents.

The most common youth bystander reactions during harassment incidents were supportive in nature. In 70 percent of incidents, victims reported that a bystander tried to make them feel better. In 55 percent of the incidents, a bystander told the victim that they were sorry it happened, and in 53 percent of the incidents, a bystander told the harasser to stop. Ambiguous responses were common in about half of the incidents. Bystanders avoided the harasser (58 percent), came closer or stayed to see the harassment happen (51 percent) or left the situation (43 percent). In some cases, bystanders tried to intervene to help the victim — in 43 percent of incidents, a bystander told an adult what happened, and in 26

percent of the incidents, a bystander tried to get other youth to help or threatened the perpetrator (27 percent) in an attempt to stop the harassment.

Negative bystander behaviors were less common. In 24 percent of incidents, bystanders joined in or made the harassment worse. In 23 percent of incidents, bystanders laughed at the victim. Incidents that involved both in-person and technology elements were more likely than those that only occurred in person and those that only occurred online to involve bystanders who told the victim they were sorry it happened, talked with other kids to get them to help, came closer or stayed to see the harassment happen or joined in the harassment and made it worse.

## Harassment Victimization in the Broader Context of Violence Exposure

The researchers were able to draw on data from NatSCEV II at wave 1 and the Technology Harassment Victimization study at wave 2 to examine predictors and risk factors for technology-involved harassment.

Youth who experienced mixed-harassment victimization at wave 2 reported the highest average number of different types of prior victimization (*mean* = 8.4), were most likely to be lifetime polyvictims (34 percent) at wave 1, and were more than four times as likely than nonpolyvictims to experience mixed-harassment victimization two years later. Specific types of victimization at wave 1 were more predictive of later mixed-harassment results at wave 2, including prior life adversity events, prior Internet victimization, physical assault, property crime incidents, peer-sibling victimization, sexual victimization and exposure to community violence.

## Study Limitations

The limitations of this research should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. The main focus of the study was on technology-involved harassment, so such incidents are slightly overrepresented. Youth's need to respond to answers in a way that they thought the interviewers expected may have influenced their responses. Unmeasured factors, such as a greater willingness among some respondents to disclose personal experiences, may have influenced some findings. Finally,

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.<sup>6,9,10,21</sup> 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.<sup>6,8,10,21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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,<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>23,24</sup> and many prevention programs focus their educational efforts on bystanders to shift social norms and provide youth with the skills to support victims.<sup>25</sup> 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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