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The Overlap Between Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Cyberbullying appears to be on the rise among adolescents due in part to increased access to electronic devices and less online supervision. Less is known about how cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying which occurs in person and the extent to which these two forms overlap. Our first aim was to examine the overlap of traditional bullying (relational, verbal, and physical) with cyberbullying. The second aim examined student- and school-level correlates of cyber victimization as compared to traditional victims. The final aim explored details of the cyberbullying experience (e.g., who sent the message, how was the message sent, and what was the message about).

Methods: Data came from 28,104 adolescents (grades, 9–12) attending 58 high schools.

Results: Approximately 23% of the youth reported being victims of any form of bullying (cyber, relational, physical, and verbal) within the last month, with 25.6% of those victims reporting being cyberbullied. The largest proportion (50.3%) of victims reported they were victimized by all four forms, whereas only 4.6% reported being only cyberbullied. Multilevel analyses indicated that as compared to those who were only traditionally bullied, those who were cyberbullied were more likely to have externalizing (odds ratio = 1.44) and internalizing symptoms (odds ratio = 1.25). Additional analyses examined detailed characteristics of the cyberbullying experiences, indicating a relatively high level of overlap between cyber and traditional bullying.

Conclusions: Implications for preventive interventions targeting youth involved with cyberbullying and its overlap with other forms of bullying are discussed.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

This study showed that electronic bullying is most likely to occur concurrently with other forms of bullying. As compared to traditional victims, cyberbullied youth were at increased risk for experiencing multiple forms of bullying, especially relational forms, and for reporting higher levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

Bullying is an unwanted aggressive behavior that occurs repeatedly against a victim, where there is an “observed or perceived” power imbalance, and includes physical (e.g., hitting and kicking), verbal (e.g., teasing and threatening), and relational (e.g., rumor spreading and exclusion) forms [1]. Recent data suggest that electronic forms of bullying may be on the rise

among adolescents, likely because of the increased access to electronic devices and less online supervision [2]. Although some research suggests that offline or “traditional” bullying has similar characteristics and correlates to those of electronic forms, other studies suggest there are some important differences [3–5]. Additional research is needed to examine if there are social–emotional problems specific to being involved in electronic bullying that are distinct from those associated with traditional forms [6]. The present study focused on cyberbullying, which is often used interchangeably with other terms, such as electronic bullying, Internet bullying, and cyber aggression [3,7,8].

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Cyberbullying

Certain characteristics of cyberbullying make it functionally different from traditional bullying [9]. Although cyberbullying may be repeated over time, a single incident can be repeated if the e-mail is forwarded to multiple people or posted online and viewed by multiple people. Furthermore, the ability to be anonymously online [7] and the possibility that those who are not socially influential can be technologically savvy shift the notion of power [8]. However, traditional bullying and cyberbullying have been assumed to be functionally similar by policy makers and educators [8]. For example, the recent federal definition included the use of electronic media to harm another individual as an example of a relational form of bullying [1]. Although the two different forms of aggression have similar psychological consequences, there is evidence that both forms of victimization have some distinct correlates and characteristics.

Prior research has linked cyber victimization with lower self-esteem, social stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, even after controlling for traditional victim status [6]. This suggests that both cyber and traditional victimization, independent of each other, may contribute to negative psychological and psychosocial outcomes. Given research showing differential correlates and consequences associated with the specific forms of cyberbullying [10], there is a need for additional research examining characteristics of cyberbullying which may differentiate it from other forms of victimization to inform interventions [11]. Therefore, an aim of the present study was to contrast traditional bullying with cyberbullying to determine if they are distinct forms of aggression or if cyberbullying is just bullying through another medium.

Although few studies have investigated the co-occurrence of cyberbullying and traditional bullying [7], both forms appear to cause psychological distress independently; however, the effects may be the greatest in individuals who experience both. Victims of both traditional and cyberbullying cannot escape from the victimization, which may contribute to the higher psychological distress experienced by victims of both cyber and traditional bullying [12]. With the increasing rates of cyberbullying, more research is needed where both cyber and traditional forms are examined simultaneously to directly compare them. These issues are of particular significance among high schoolers, as involvement in cyberbullying may increase through high school, whereas other forms of bullying generally peak in late elementary or middle school [13]. There has also been research linking school-level variables, such as indicators of disorder, with traditional bullying [14], but there has been less investigation into their associations with cyber victimization.

Present study

This study examined the overlap of verbal, physical, and relational bullying with cyberbullying among a large sample of high school students. We also explored individual-level characteristics (gender, race, and grade), the experience of additional forms of bullying (relational, verbal, and physical), social–emotional characteristics (internalizing and externalizing symptoms), and the experience of cyberbullying versus traditional bullying, while adjusting for school-level covariates. The third aim explored details of the cyberbullying experience (e.g., who sent the message, how was the message sent, order of the cyber experience relative to traditional bullying, and what was the

message about). This work has important implications for determining the extent to which prevention programs should be tailored to meet the unique characteristics of cyberbullying or if there is considerable overlap with traditional bullying, and thus traditional approaches may also prove useful.

Methods

Participants

Data came from 28,104 adolescents enrolled in grades 9–12 (mean age, 15.93 years; standard deviation, 1.33) at 58 Maryland high schools that are participating in a statewide study of school climate, called the Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools (MDS3) Initiative. Data were collected in spring 2012 via a Web-based survey; approximately 24.83 classrooms per school (mostly language arts) were randomly selected to participate in the data collection. See Table 1 for additional sample characteristics. The nonidentifiable data were obtained and approved for analysis by the institutional review board.

Measures

Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative Climate Survey. The MDS3 Climate Survey [15] was developed by the Johns Hopkins Center for Youth Violence Prevention in collaboration with project partners. The self-report measure was used to assess the following variables.

Youth demographics. Participating adolescents responded to a series of demographic questions, including age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Forms of bullying victimization. The survey assessed bullying consistent with the recommendation of Olweus [9] and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [1]; it included a definition of bullying, which read, “A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons. Bullying often occurs in situations where there is a power or status difference. Bullying

Table 1
Student and school demographic characteristics

| Student characteristic (N = 28,104 students) | N (%) |
|--|---------------------------|
| Gender | |
| Male | 13,724 (50.6) |
| Female | 13,573 (49.4) |
| Race/ethnicity | |
| Native American/American-Indian | 437 (.6) |
| Native Hawaiian | 158 (.2) |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 1,206 (3.9) |
| Black/African-American | 8,789 (33.5) |
| White/Caucasian | 13,421 (53.6) |
| Hispanic | 1,331 (5.6) |
| Other | 1,939 (2.6) |
| Grade | |
| 9th/10th | 14,457 (52.5) |
| 11th/12th | 12,605 (47.5) |
| School characteristic (N = 58 schools) | Mean (standard deviation) |
| Minority % | 45.9 (25.1) |
| Suspension % | 22.3 (11.1) |
| School enrollment | 1,268 (466.8) |
| Student–teacher ratio | 20.2 (3.15) |

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