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Cyberbullying only rarely the sole factor identified in teen suicides

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Cyberbullying – the use of the Internet, phones or other technologies to repeatedly harass or mistreat peers – is often linked with teen suicide in media reports. However, new research presented on Saturday, Oct. 20, at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) National Conference and Exhibition in New Orleans, shows that the reality is more complex. Most teen suicide victims are bullied both online and in school, and many suicide victims also suffer from depression.

For the abstract, "Cyberbullying and Suicide: A Retrospective Analysis of 41 Cases," researchers searched the Internet for reports of youth suicides where cyberbullying was a reported factor. Information about demographics and the event itself were then collected through searches of online news media and social networks. Finally, descriptive statistics were used to assess the rate of pre-existing mental illness, the co-occurrence of other forms of bullying, and the characteristics of the electronic media associated with each suicide case.

The study identified 41 suicide cases (24 female, 17 male, ages 13 to 18) from the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. In the study, 24 percent of teens were the victims of homophobic bullying, including the 12 percent of teens identified as homosexual and another 12 percent of teens who were identified as heterosexual or of unknown sexual preference.

Suicides most frequently occurred in September (15 percent) and January (12 percent) although these higher rates may have occurred by

chance. The incidence of reported suicide cases increased over time, with 56 percent occurring from 2003 to 2010, compared to 44 percent from January 2011 through April 2012.

Seventy-eight percent of adolescents who committed suicide were bullied both at school and online, and only 17 percent were targeted online only. A mood disorder was reported in 32 percent of the teens, and depression symptoms in an additional 15 percent.

"Cyberbullying is a factor in some suicides, but almost always there are other factors such as mental illness or face-to-face bullying," said study author John C. LeBlanc, MD, MSc, FRCPC, FAAP. "Cyberbullying usually occurs in the context of regular bullying."

Cyberbullying occurred through various media, with Formspring and Facebook specifically mentioned in 21 cases. Text or video messaging was noted in 14 cases.

"Certain social media, by virtue of allowing anonymity, may encourage cyberbullying," said Dr. LeBlanc. "It is difficult to prove a cause and effect relationship, but I believe there is little justification for anonymity."

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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