

New study reveals prevalence of cyberbullying and its psychological impact on nonheterosexual youth

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Schools are typically on guard against students who bully by inflicting repeated violence on other students. But technology has given rise to a relatively new form of bullying which inflicts emotional harm in a stealth manner, working through Web sites, chat rooms, e-mail, cell phones and instant messaging.

And according to a new national study by Iowa State University researchers, one out of every two lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and allied youths are regular victims of "[cyberbullying](#)," which causes psychological and [emotional distress](#) to victims -- producing thoughts of suicide in some who are repeatedly victimized.

In the [online survey](#) of 444 junior high, high school and college students between the ages of 11 and 22 -- including 350 self-identified non-heterosexual subjects -- 54 percent of the LGBT and allied youth reported being victims of cyberbullying in the 30 days prior to the survey. Cyberbullying includes attacks such as electronic distribution of humiliating photos, dissemination of false or private information, or targeting victims in cruel online polls.

Among the non-heterosexual respondents, 45 percent reported feeling depressed as a result of being cyberbullied, 38 percent felt embarrassed, and 28 percent felt anxious about attending school. More than a quarter (26 percent) had [suicidal thoughts](#).

"There's a saying that we've now changed to read, 'Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can kill,'" said Warren Blumenfeld, an Iowa State assistant professor of curriculum and instruction and the study's lead author. "And especially at this age -- pre-adolescence through adolescence -- this is a time when peer influences are paramount in a young person's life. If one is ostracized and attacked, that can have devastating consequences -- not only physically, but on their [emotional health](#) for the rest of their lives."

Co-authored by Robyn Cooper, a research and evaluation scientist at ISU's Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE), the study is being published in this month's special LGBT-themed issue of the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*.

The results underscore the helplessness felt by victims of cyberbullying. Forty percent of the non-heterosexual respondents indicated that their parents wouldn't believe them if they were being bullied online, while 55 percent reported that their parents couldn't do anything to stop it. Fifty seven percent also indicated that they didn't think a school official could do anything to stop it.

"They feared that there might be more retribution by 'tattling,'" said Blumenfeld, who was bullied as a teen for being gay.

"One of the things we found is that the LGBT students really want to make a difference," said Cooper, who authored her doctoral dissertation on minority stress and the well-being of sexual minority college students. "They want their stories told. They want people to know what they're going through, but they don't want the repercussions of being bullied. So being able to respond to this survey was very helpful."

One in four of the LGBT and allied students responded that they needed to learn how to deal with cyberbullying by themselves. More than half

also feared telling their parents about the cyberbullying because they might restrict their use of technology, which Blumenfeld says is often the "lifeline to the outside world" for many young LGBT students who have been ostracized by their peers at school.

The ISU study also proposes strategies for cyberbullying prevention. Eighty percent of the survey's respondents indicated that their peers should do more to stop it.

"One of the strategies coming out of this study - since respondents expect and want their peers to step in more - is that we should find ways on our campuses to empower young people to speak up and act as allies," Blumenfeld said. "In bullying circles, it's empowering the bystander to become the upstander to help eliminate the problem."

Blumenfeld and Cooper recommend developing social norms programming at schools that focus on peer influences that correct misperceived societal norms.

The ISU researchers plan to author additional papers on their analysis from this survey. They also have submitted a new grant proposal to extend their research to a larger national sample that would include face-to-face interviews and focus groups.

Provided by Iowa State University

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