

One in 10 Florida teens report engaging in 'digital self-harm'

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Approximately 10% of Florida middle and high school students report having engaged in "digital self-harm"—they have cyberbullied themselves. It is an emerging form of self-harm that may be increasing

among adolescents, according to a recent study led by an FIU researcher.

Digital [self-harm](#) is when an individual anonymously posts mean or hurtful comments about themselves online, according to Ryan Meldrum, lead author of the study and associate professor of criminology and criminal justice in FIU's Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs. This behavior was first named following the suicide of Hannah Smith, a 14-year-old British girl who had made [negative posts](#) to herself on [social media](#) in the weeks leading up to her death in 2013.

Adolescents may be more likely to engage in digital self-harm after being bullied or cyberbullied, Meldrum explained. Being bullied can lead adolescents to have negative thoughts about themselves, and this is known to make adolescents more likely to physically self-harm themselves to distract from the emotional pain, he said. Digital self-harm might follow a similar pathway, where bullying victims turn to the internet to post hurtful things about themselves in hopes that others will respond positively and alleviate the negative feelings that stem from being bullied.

"Now that adolescents have digital outlets where they can go online and post negative things about themselves, they may do so in order to elicit comments from others saying "No, you're not that, you're beautiful, you're great," Meldrum said. "They're seeking some sort of validation that may alleviate those negative emotions."

The team of researchers used data drawn from two questions about digital self-harm that were included on the 2019 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS), which collected data from 10,000 Florida middle and high school students. The survey found that 10% of Florida students reported having engaged in digital self-harm in the past 12 months, and 6% reported having done so in the past 30 days.

"The frequency of digital self-harm may be on the rise because, as a result of COVID-19, adolescents are spending a lot more time online and are having a lot less face-to-face interaction," Meldrum said.

The study, published last month in *Deviant Behavior*, is only the second peer-reviewed study published about digital self-harm, Meldrum said. He says the research team is trying to bring knowledge and awareness to the behavior to aid professionals who may interact with adolescents engaging in digital self-harm. It's possible that, like physical self-harm, digital self-harm may correlate with suicidal thoughts.

"This study is important for raising awareness about digital self-harm for people in the field, such as psychologists, pediatricians, school counselors, and [social workers](#), as they may consider incorporating questions about the behavior into screening tools," Meldrum said. "It's especially important if digital self-harm may be a stepping stone to serious forms of physical self-harm. We may be able to prevent physical self-harm or later suicide attempts if we can predict that sequence of events."

More information: Ryan C. Meldrum et al. Bullying Victimization, Negative Emotions, and Digital Self-Harm: Testing a Theoretical Model of Indirect Effects, *Deviant Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2020.1833380](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1833380)

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