

Trends in Online Harassment: Findings from the Youth Internet Safety Studies

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This is the second of a series of four bulletins highlighting the results of the 3rd Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS). This bulletin documents overall trends in online harassment between YISS-1, conducted in 2000, YISS-2, conducted in 2005, and YISS-3, conducted in 2010; as well as details about the 2010 harassment episodes.

Public anxiety around youth online harassment (sometimes referred to as cyber-bullying[†]) has concerned the belief that it is prevalent and rapidly expanding, but also that this is happening because the nature of the online environment facilitates hostile interactions for youth¹⁻⁵. For example, some online safety experts note that the anonymity and remoteness of online interactions reduce inhibitions that would otherwise restrain youth from engaging in harassment. However, another possibility is that an increase in online harassment might be expected simply because all peer interactions— both positive and negative – are moving online, including arguments, harassment and relational bullying. Research suggests that online behavior is often an extension of or similar to social behavior in the face-to-face world⁶ and that there is significant overlap between online and offline victimization experiences^{7,8}.

DEFINITION OF HARASSMENT

- **Harassment:** Threats or other offensive behavior (not sexual solicitation), sent online to the youth or posted online about the youth for others to see.
- **Distressing harassments** were episodes where youth rated themselves as being very or extremely upset or afraid as a result of the incident.

[†] We do not use the term “cyber-bullying” because the definition is unclear. Bullying is defined as involving repetition and power imbalance but these features have not yet been clearly applied to incidents involving technology.

How the Youth Internet Safety Surveys were Conducted

- ◆ Telephone interviews with unique nationally -representative samples of young Internet users, age 10 to 17: 1501 in YISS-1, 1500 in YISS-2, and 1560 in YISS-3 (See Table 1 for youth demographic characteristics).
- ◆ “Internet use” was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past 6 months at home, school, a friend’s home, a library, a cell phone, or some other location.
- ◆ One parent or guardian was interviewed first for about 10 minutes.
- ◆ With consent of the parent or guardian, youth were interviewed for about 30 minutes.
- ◆ Care was taken to preserve privacy and confidentiality during interviews.
- ◆ Youth participants received \$10 checks and information about Internet safety.
- ◆ The YISS interviews took place from:
 - ◇ YISS-1: Aug. 1999 to Feb. 2000
 - ◇ YISS-2: March to June 2005
 - ◇ YISS-3: Aug. 2010 to Jan. 2011

Table 1: Youth & Household Characteristics for 2000, 2005 & 2010 Samples

Youth and Household Characteristics	2000 (n=1501) %	2005 (n=1500) %	2010 (n=1560) %	p value
Gender (male)	53	49	50	.08
Age				
10 to 12	23	23	21	.02
13 to 15	48	43	45	
16 to 17	29	34	34	
Race				
White, non-Hispanic	73	71	67	.002
Black, non-Hispanic	10	11	13	
Hispanic or Latino, any Race	7	9	10	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2	1	3	
Asian	3	2	3	
Other (includes bi-racial)	2	3	2	
Don't know/not ascertainable	4	3	2	
Parental marital status				
Married	79	76	78	.01
Living with a partner	1	3	2	
Separated	3	1	2	
Divorced	10	10	10	
Widowed	2	2	2	
Single, never married	5	8	6	
Youth lives with both biological parents	63	62	66	.04
Highest level of education in household				
Not a high school (HS) graduate	3	2	3	<.001
HS graduate	21	20	14	
Some college	22	23	19	
College graduate	32	32	37	
Post college degree	22	22	28	
Annual household income				
Less than \$20,000	8	8	12	<.001
\$20,000 to \$50,000	38	27	18	
More than \$50,000 to \$75,000	23	24	16	
More than \$75,000	23	33	45	
Don't know/missing	7	8	9	

CHANGES IN YOUTH INTERNET USE PATTERNS OVER TIME

Between 2000 and 2010 a number of changes occurred in terms of how youth were using the Internet (Table 2).

- By 2010 almost all youth (97%) were using the Internet from home, up from 74% in 2000. Almost half of youth (47%) were using the Internet from cell phones.
- Frequency of use also increased – 76% of youth said they used the Internet in the past week in 2000; 86% in 2005; 94% in 2010.
- Intensity of use also increased – 32% of youth said they used the Internet for more than 2 hours per day in 2010, up from 13% in 2000 and 23% in 2005.
- Many youth (69%) also said they used the Internet 5 to 7 days per week in 2010 (36% did so in 2000 and 49% in 2005).
- More youth were using the Internet to talk with people they knew in person offline, like friends from school (93%) and less with people they met online (40%) by 2010.

Topics Covered in the YISS Interviews

- ◆ Experiences of sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment via the Internet in the past year and reactions to those experiences.
- ◆ Involvement in sexting in the past year, including the content of the images and the context in which such events occur (YISS-3 only).
- ◆ The nature of friendships formed over the Internet in the past year.
- ◆ Knowledge of Internet safety practices among young Internet users and their parents or guardians.
- ◆ Assessment of factors that might make some youth more vulnerable than others to sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment via the Internet.

Because we used the same methods and asked most of the same questions in all three studies, we are able to compare many results to see what has changed over the past decade.

HARASSMENT TRENDS

In 2010 approximately 1 in 9 youth Internet users (11%) received an online harassment in the past year (See Figure 1). This continues an increase from 6% in 2000 to 9% in 2005. Overall, reports of online harassment increased 83% over the past decade.

What youth said about harassment in 2010:

“They put an embarrassing video of me online and said cruel things about me.” – Girl, 15

“I had a website on facebook that was about hating me. I hate Jake site.” – Boy, 13

“Things I told this person in private and they shared that information with others.” – Girl, 13

“I was talking with her boyfriend and she said threatened to kick my butt.” – Girl, 17

“One of my friends was being racist towards me. My Dad reported my friend on facebook.” – Girl, 15

“Someone tagged me in a picture, I was sleeping and friends wrote on me and posted it on facebook but it wasn’t anything serious.” – Boy, 15

Table 2: Youth Internet Use Patterns Between 2000, 2005 & 2010 (N=4,561), %

Internet Use Characteristics	2000 (n=1501)	2005 (n=1500)	2010 (n=1560)	p value
Location(s) youth spent time on the Internet in past year^a				
Home	74	91	97	<.001
School	73	90	89	<.001
Friend’s home ^b	69	69	70	.71
Cellular telephone	–	17	47	<.001
Other place (includes library)	5	43	38	<.001
Last time youth used Internet				
Past week	76	86	94	<.001
Past 2 weeks	11	6	3	
Past month or longer	13	8	3	
Number of hours youth spent on Internet on a typical day when online				
1 hour or less	61	45	38	<.001
More than 1 hour to 2 hours	26	31	31	
More than 2 hours	13	23	32	
Number of days youth went on Internet in a typical week^c				
1 day or less	18	8	4	<.001
2 to 4 days	47	42	27	
5 to 7 days	36	49	69	
How youth used Internet				
Went to chat rooms ^d	56	30	48	<.001
Social networking sites	---	---	80	---
Who youth talked to online^e				
People youth knew in person offline	81	87	93	<.001
People youth knew only online	46	43	40	.004

^a Multiple responses possible.

^b In YISS-1 we asked if youth used the Internet in “other households,” which included friends’ homes. In YISS-2 & 3, we specifically asked all youth if they used the Internet at friends’ homes.

^c Based on youth who used the Internet in the past week or past 2 weeks (n=1284 for YISS-1; n=1264 for YISS-2; n=1491 for YISS-3).

^d In YISS-1 & 2 we asked one general question about using chat rooms, in YISS-3 we asked youth whether they used video chat (ChatRoulette, Omegle, Skype) and chat rooms that do not include video separately. For the purposes of these analyses these two categories were combined.

^e Answers not mutually exclusive.

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

DISTRESSING HARASSMENT TRENDS

Distressing harassment continued to increase, from 2% in 2000 to 3% in 2005 to 5% in 2010; indicating a 150% increase over the past decade (See Figure 2). The proportion of harassment episodes that were distressing went from 39% in 2000 to 38% in 2005 to 44% in 2010.

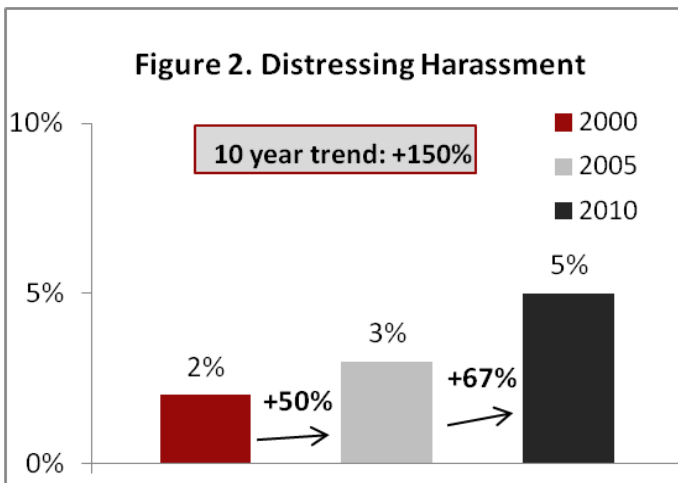
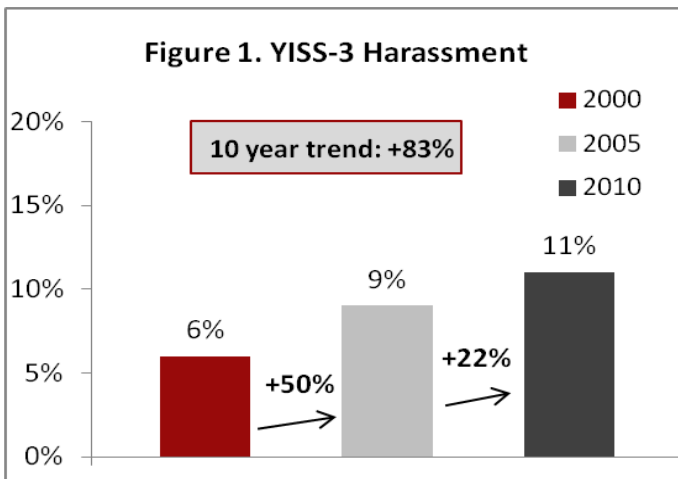
What youth said about distressing harassment in 2010

“Well it was my ex-boyfriend, and he was posting on websites that I was a whore and all this stuff.” – Girl, 17

“Um, well it’s kind of like a guy issue. These girls came up to me swearing and cussing. Then they sent me an IM on facebook saying you better stop doing this or we’ll hurt you. So I went to the school about it and the cops got involved.” – Girl, 15

“They took pictures of me while I was changing in the locker room for gym and posted it on the internet and made mean comments about how my body was shaped and everything.” – Girl, 14

“They took a picture of me doing something, like using the bathroom and they posted it.” – Boy, 13



Key Trends in Online Harassment (Tables 3 & 4)

- In 2010, the overwhelming majority of harassment incidents were occurring on social networking sites.
- Online harassment incidents increasingly involved communication with school friends.
- There was a large increase in the proportion of female victims - from 48% to 69%.
- There was a decrease in White victims and corresponding increase in Black victims – up to 14% by 2010.
- There was an increase in disclosures about harassment to school staff.

Table 3: Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Online Harassment between 2000, 2005 and 2010

Youth and Household Characteristics	2000 (n=95) %	2005 (n=130) %	2010 (n=176) %	p value
Youth sex				
Male	52	42	31	.004
Female	48	58	69	
Youth age				
10-12 years	19	12	11	.45
13-15 years	49	51	50	
16-17 years	32	37	39	
Youth race/ethnicity				
White	74	81	66	.05
Black	7	6	14	
Hispanic	13	7	9	
Other	2	5	8	
Missing	4	1	3	
Household income				
Less than \$20K	6	5	12	.001
\$20K to \$50K	42	27	23	
\$51K to \$75K	22	31	18	
More than \$75K	26	30	37	
Missing	3	6	11	

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

Table 4: Online Harassment Incident Characteristics and Outcomes between 2000, 2005 and 2010, %

Incident Characteristics	2000 (n=95)	2005 (n=130)	2010 (n=176)	p value
Gender of harasser				
Male	54	51	43	<.001
Female	20	29	48	
Don't know	26	21	9	
Age of harasser				
Under 18	63	59	71	.21
18 to 25 years	13	21	12	
Older than 25	1	2	2	
Don't know	23	19	16	
Relation to harasser				
Met online	71	55	31	<.001
School friend/acquaintance	23	36	58	
Other offline acquaintance	5	7	8	
Don't know	1	2	3	
Number of people who did this				
One	78	73	72	.91
2-3	14	19	19	
4 or more	6	5	5	
Don't know	2	3	4	
Where on Internet it first happened				
Using an email account	19	13	2	<.001
Chat room	32	11	4	
Instant messaging	34	47	2	
Social networking	0	0	82	
Texting	0	0	3	
Other	14	26	5	
Don't know	2	2	3	
Harassing behaviors occurred more than one time	31	41	40	.19
INCIDENT OUTCOMES				
Incident was disclosed to someone^a	64	69	75	.18
Friend	34	40	37	.62
Sibling	3	5	7	.45
Parent/guardian	51	31	40	.02
School staff	6	2	12	.006
Other	5	8	8	.69
How situation ended^a				
Removed self from situation (blocked harasser, left site or computer)	47	49	23	<.001
Told harasser to stop	12	17	13	.47
Changed screen name, profile, e-mail, or phone number	0	3	1	.15
Stopped without doing anything	9	5	14	.03
Situation still happening	3	1	5	.16
Other	27	31	41	.04
Incident ever reported to ISP, Cyber Tipline, or police	21	9	13	.04
Upset	20	29	22	.08
Afraid	13	20	16	.14
Very/extremely embarrassed	17	21	20	.53

^a Multiple responses possible

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

2010 Data Only

Who were the youth targeted for harassment in 2010? (Table 5)

- Harassment was reported by youth of all ages: overall 39% were ages 16 or 17; 50% were ages 13-15 and 11% were ages 10-12. Distressing incidents similarly covered the age spectrum.
- Overall more girls reported harassment – 69%. Girls were even more likely to report a distressing (79%) harassment.

Table 5: Characteristics of Youth Reporting Online Harassment in 2010, %

Youth Characteristics	All Incidents (n=176) 11% of Youth	Distressing Incidents (n=78) 5% of Youth
Age of youth		
10	3	3
11	3	4
12	5	4
13	15	18
14	20	18
15	15	11
16	23	27
17	16	15
Gender of youth		
Girl	69	79
Boy	31	21

Who was harassing youth in 2010? (Table 6—Next Page)

- Harassers were both male (43%) and female (48%); few youth did not know the gender of the harasser. Fifty-five percent of harassers in distressing episodes were female.
- Nearly three in four of all harassment episodes were committed by other youth (70%) as well as 74% of distressing harassment episodes.
- Over half of harassers (66%) were people the youth knew in person; 31% were people the youth met online.
- About one-quarter of harassment episodes were committed by more than one person.
- Almost half of harassment episodes were committed more than once by the same person or group of people.

2010 Data Only**Table 6: Harasser Characteristics in 2010, %**

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
Gender of harasser		
Male	43	38
Female	48	55
Don't know	9	6
Age of harasser		
Younger than 18 years	70	74
18 to 25 years	12	11
Older than 25 years	2	4
<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>16 (28)</u>	<u>10 (8)</u>
Thought person was 18 or older^a	4	9
Youth was very or extremely certain of harasser's age^b	76	79
Relation to harasser		
Met online	31	32
<u>Knew in person before harassment</u>	<u>66 (n=116)</u>	<u>67 (n=52)</u>
Friend/acquaintance from school	88	87
Friend/acquaintance from somewhere else	3	2
Romantic partner (or ex-partner)	5	6
Family member under 18 years old	1	2
Neighbor	1	2
Someone else	2	2
Don't know / not ascertainable	3	1
Number of people who did this		
One	72	64
2 – 3	19	22
4 – 6	5	8
7 – 10	1	1
11 or more	0	0
Don't know	4	4
Happened series of times (same person/people did this more than once)	40	49

^a Asked of the 28 who did not know the specific age of the harasser.

^b Only youth who gave the harasser's actual age were asked this question (n=148 for all incidents and n=70 for distressing incidents).

Both Tables—Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

How often and where did harassment occur? (Table 7)

- Half of the harassment episodes over the course of one year occurred one time; 23% happened twice; and one-quarter happened more frequently; distressing harassment more commonly happened multiple times.
- The length of time the harassment lasted varied – about one-third for one day, but one in four went on for a month or longer; distressing harassment tended to last longer.
- Harassment occurred mostly through computers; cell phones were being used in about one in ten incidents.
- Most youth were at home using social networking sites when the harassment occurred.

Table 7: Length and Location of Harassment in 2010, %

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
Number of times happened in past year		
One time	51	38
2 times	23	23
3 to 5 times	19	27
6 or more times	5	9
Don't know / not ascertainable	1	3
Length of time incident went on for		
One day	36	27
2 – 6 days	25	21
7 – 13 days	13	14
14 – 29 days	6	9
One month or longer	19	27
Don't know / not ascertainable	2	3
Type of technology used most to access Internet when this happened		
Desktop computer	48	49
Laptop computer	33	32
Cell phone	13	15
Other	4	4
Don't know / not ascertainable	2	0
Location incident usually happened		
Home	80	82
School	8	8
Public library	2	3
Friend's home	5	3
Some other place	4	5
Don't know / not ascertainable	2	0
Where on Internet this (first) happened		
Social networking site	82	85
Using an email account	2	3
Online video chat room	1	1
Chat room with no video component	3	4
Using instant messages	2	1
In game room or other game site	2	0
Happened through text messaging	3	3
Some other place	3	3
Don't know / not ascertainable	3	1

2010 Data Only

What type of harassment did youth report? (Table 8)

- Most of the harassment took the form of being called mean names, exclusion, spreading rumors, and making fun of or teasing youth.
- Youth said that in almost half (41%) of all episodes, and 53% of distressing, the harasser was someone who had more power or strength than they did.

Table 8: Type of Harassment in 2010, %

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
Did the person who did this ever....		
Call you mean names	65	74
Exclude you because they were trying to make you upset	50	64
Spread rumors about you, whether they were true or not	49	67
Make fun of you or tease you in a nasty way	44	51
Share with others something that was meant to be private (something you wrote or a picture of you)	23	38
Send a picture or video to other people that showed you being hurt or embarrassed	6	10
Harasser had more power or strength (e.g., bigger, more friends, more popular, or some other way)	41	53

How often was an aggravating feature part of the harassment? (Table 9)

- In 41% of all harassment episodes and 56% of distressing the harasser made (or attempted to make) offline contact with the youth – the most common forms were phone calls and asking to meet.
- In 14% of harassment incidents the harasser sent the respondent a picture of themselves; in 15% the harasser requested a picture of the respondent.

Table 9: Aggravating Features of Harassment in 2010, %

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
Forms of offline contact ^a		
Asked to meet somewhere	24	32
Sent offline mail	1	1
Called on telephone (including cell phone)	30	43
Went to home	13	15
Gave money, gifts, other things	6	6
Bought plane, train, or bus ticket	1	0
Any of the above	41	56
Harasser sent picture of self	14	22
Harasser requested picture of youth	15	19

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

^a Multiple responses possible.

How did harassment end and who did youth tell? (Table 10)

- Most youth handled the situation themselves – 23% removed themselves from the situation and 15% told the harasser to stop.
- Few youth had a parent or teacher handle the situation (5%) and 3% called the police or other authorities.
- The majority of youth (74%) told someone about the harassment – usually a parent or guardian (55%) and/or a friend (50%); more distressing episodes were disclosed (87%).
- 13% of all harassment and 19% of distressing harassment episodes were ever disclosed or otherwise known to police or and Internet Service Provider.
- Most youth who did not tell anyone said it was not serious enough; 20% of youth not reporting a distressing harassment said they did not report because they were too scared.
- In 40% of episodes the youth said there was someone else online with them when the incident happened; 19% did something to help stop it and 10% did something to make the situation worse.
- In situations where the harassment occurred through a home computer, about one in four families installed some kind of software to help prevent the incident from happening again.

2010 Data Only**Table 10: Ending the Situation and Disclosure of Online Harassment in 2010, %**

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
How situation ended ^a		
Removed self from situation (blocking or leaving site or computer)	23	21
Told harasser to stop/confronted or warned harasser	15	13
Changed screen name, profile, e-mail address, or telephone number	1	3
Parent/guardian or teacher handled situation	5	5
Still happening	5	6
Stopped without youth doing anything	14	8
Called law enforcement or other authorities	3	5
Other	37	45
Don't know	3	0
Incident disclosed ^a	74 (n=130)	87 (n=68)
Friend	50	49
Brother or sister	9	13
Parent/guardian	55	63
Other adult relative	7	6
Teacher, counselor, or other school personnel	18	26
Law enforcement or other authority, ISP	5	6
Someone else	5	6
No one / not ascertainable	34	15
Ever known to or disclosed to ISP or police	13	19
Of youth who did not tell anyone, why didn't youth tell	25% (n=44)	13 (n=10)
Not serious enough	41	10
Too scared	5	20
Too embarrassing	9	10
Thought might lose Internet access	2	0
Happens all the time	5	0
Something else (not specified)	25	50
Don't know	14	10
Someone else online with you when incident happened (someone who could see or read what happened)	40 (n=70)	41 (n=32)
Someone did something to help stop it	19	19
Someone did something to make situation worse	10	16
Don't know	1	0
Blocking and filtering Software		
Software on computer to block pop-up ads or SPAM email when this happened ^a	59	62
Other software on computer to filter, block or monitor Internet use when this happened ^b	35	35
After this happened, family installed any kind of software to keep this from happening again ^b	21	27

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

^a Multiple responses possible.

^b Only asked of youth with Internet access at home (n = 144 for all incidents, n = 63 for distressing incidents).

How distressing were the harassment episodes?**(Table 11) - 2010 Data Only**

- In about half of harassment incidents the youth was very or extremely upset or afraid about what happened.
- Over one-third reported at least one stress symptom such as staying away from the Internet, feeling unable to stop thinking about it, feeling jumpy or irritable, or losing interest in things as a result.

Table 11: Distress Related to Online Harassment in 2010, %

Incident Characteristics	All (n=176)	Distressing (n=78)
Distress: Very/extremely^a		
Upset	39	88
Afraid	19	43
Embarrassed	28	43
Youth With no/low levels of being upset or afraid	53	0
Stress symptoms (more than a little/all the time)^b		
At least one of the following^a	37	69
Staying away from Internet or particular part of it	18	36
Being unable to stop thinking about it	22	46
Feeling jumpy or irritable	16	36
Losing interest in things	10	19

^a Multiple responses possible.

^b These items are based on standard research measures of stress responses used to assess post-traumatic stress disorder. The items measure avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The continued increase in online harassment needs further attention. The only area we found a continued increase in reports was online harassment – from 6% in 2000, to 9% in 2005 and 11% in 2010. Although harassment did increase rates are still low. And importantly, the increase did not seem disproportional to the increased amount of time youth are now spending online. While some have worried that the online environment might facilitate harassing behavior, this is not a strong explanation of the trends in our view. It appears more plausible to us that the increasing amount of interaction online, plus an environment that may allow more interactions among friends to be observed, has simply increased the likelihood that hostilities are migrating online and being observed there.

- 2. Girls are more likely to be victims of online harassment, usually in the form of being called mean names, exclusion, rumors spread about them, and being made fun of or teased.** There was a large increase in the proportion of female victims, rising from 48% to 69%. In fact, rates for males calculated separately did not rise during this 10 year period. The peer aggression research has long noted that females tend to predominate in verbal and relational types of aggression⁹, and the social networking platforms are clearly more suited to this than physical aggression and intimidation. It may be that the online environments' suitability for female-preferred types of hostility has prompted the gender skewed increase.
- 3. Almost half (40%) of online harassment episodes occurred in the presence of bystanders – some trying to help stop the situations and some making it worse.** More and more attention is being placed on the importance of bystanders in peer victimization. One question is whether technology-based harassment is equally likely as offline victimization to have bystanders. Peers are present in as many as 85% of school bullying episodes¹⁰, however research has found that few actively reach out to help the victim (10% - 25%)¹¹⁻¹³. Our findings indicate fewer bystander situations occur online; 40% of harassment incidents occurred when someone else was online who could see or read what happened. However, of those situations that did involve bystanders, 19% did something to help stop it; a similar percentage occurring in more traditional harassment and bullying incidents. More research is needed on the ways in which intervention by peers is conducted and proving helpful in preventing further harassment in electronic environments in particular. With the increased communication provided by new technology and the lasting nature of electronic evidence, it is possible that bystander opportunities may increase for youth.
- 4. Most unwanted experiences and harassment in particular, occurred in social networking sites in 2010.** In 2010, the overwhelming majority of harassment incidents (82%) were occurring on social networking sites and increasingly involved communication with school friends. It is likely that youth are able to see more negative comments about themselves in the exchanges among their school-based peer groups via social networking sites than used to be the case. It should be noted, however, that not

all negative online experiences have increased along with the changing online activities; as we note in this report, unwanted sexual solicitations actually decreased during this same period¹⁴ perhaps because social networking sites allow for restricting access to friends and also allow people to identify where solicitations are coming from. One hypothesis is that as youth have migrated to social networking sites like Facebook for their online interactions, they have gravitated away from more open access sites like chat rooms and confined more of their online interactions to people that they already know. This might explain some of the overall decline in solicitation, and might mean that rather than making youth more vulnerable the social networking revolution may have provided an additional measure of protection, at least against unwanted contact from online strangers.

5. The percentage of youth reporting distressing incidents remains small. Even with the dynamic changes in technology, distressing online harassment occurred to only a minority of youth and there is no indication, even across the shifting technology developments of the last decade, that this type of victimization is something significantly different from the peer victimization problems that have always been, and continue to be, a concern for youth. In fact, whether online or offline, the degree of distress caused by a harassment incident is likely influenced by a number of possible factors: a believable physical threat, sexual taunts, a sense of powerlessness, or a greater number of perpetrators or witnesses, for example. There may be ways that the online environment might increase the likelihood of certain highly negative features such as more witnesses, or perhaps greater powerlessness under some conditions. On the other hand, the online environment may ameliorate distress by making it easier for victims to prove their mistreatment to parents and others, as well as get support. Such hypotheses should be the focus of future research efforts. Overall, the conditions causing the distress are not new and therefore the focus of prevention and education efforts can apply to many different environments and locations, including shifting and even unpredictable online settings.

6. More of the offensive and unwanted experiences are coming from people youth know in person, usually other kids. The data from this study and some others suggests that much of online harassment is an extension of offline peer problems with disagreements being drawn into a more public space. Similarly, we saw more online harassment episodes occurring at the hands of school peers. A good deal of research is still needed to understand the broader context of online harassment—for example how often and under what circumstances incidents of serious online harassment are part of an ongoing offline peer victimization. But to the extent this is happening, schools can play a critical role and can likely make the biggest difference by implementing evidence-based bullying programs and social emotional learning programs that have incorporated information about online harassment and behavior into their curricula. What distinguishes effective prevention programs is a focus on skill-building: students are taught key relational and social skills such as perspective-taking, emotional regulation, communication skills, and effective bystander intervention skills¹⁵. These are skills that would likely translate to any environment or communication modality, including the Internet, which minimizes the concern adults have about predicting new popular websites or technologies.

7. Reporting to school authorities remains low but increasing slowly; friends are still most likely to hear about these incidents. An encouraging trend that we observed was an increase in disclosures about harassment to school staff. While the rate of such disclosures was still small in 2010 (12%), it may reflect an increasing involvement of schools in this problem. Schools have been attempting to provide more in the way of Internet safety and bullying prevention education¹⁶. At the same time friends are generally the people youth go to when they want to tell someone about what happened.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

More information about the Youth Internet Safety Surveys and about youth Internet victimization is available on the Crimes against Children Research Center web site: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/>

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