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[Violence] Policy Perspectives

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Prior to the turn of the century, digital communications (text messaging, social networking, digital pictures, etc.) may have played a secondary role in peer aggression, but in 2014, digital technology has become a primary method of communication between youth. A Pew study released in 2011 found that almost all teens use the Internet, and 78% own a cell phone.

Social networking is almost universal: a 2014 study of the same sample reported on here (400-plus 18- and 19-year-olds at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University) found that 97% have a Facebook (social networking) account. Three-quarters of teens "text" (i.e., use text messaging) and the median number of texts per day is sixty. Heavy digital use is found among all social classes, and is not a passing fad. In 2010, 44% of teens studied at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) listed text messaging as their most preferred type of communication, but by 2014, that proportion had risen to 65%.

Digital communications are largely used for positive interactions but are also, without dispute, one vehicle for harassment and threats between youth. Evidence suggests that at least some adults may underestimate peers as a significant source of online threats. A 2011 study from the University of New Hampshire noted (in common with other research) that most digital harassment (70%) came from peers, not from adult strangers. In the 2014 MARC study, two-thirds saw peer cyberbullying as the most potent threat online, but only 6% saw adult predators that way; the majority of freshman also reported that adults overestimate the danger from predators and underestimate the danger from peers.

Another form of student to student violence, campus sexual assault in high schools and colleges, has become a growing and serious problem. We lack both specific knowledge about behaviors that contribute to sexual assault on campus and about effective ways to handle sexual assaults that occur within these educational institutions. The potential importance of digital communications in the commission of a sexual assault and after should not be understated. We need to have a better understanding of digital communications happening between perpetrators or between perpetrators and victims; what follow-up, potentially traumatic communications could be going on; how digital communications might reinforce myths and beliefs that contribute to rape; etc. We are aware of severe forms of sexual harassment that occur in digital realms, but almost no research has examined these.

These trends argue loudly and persistently for a focus on digital behaviors and health within public health policy. Ignoring the public health impact of digital technology is tantamount to ignoring one of the most significant social trends in the last fifty years. Public health must begin to define the epidemiology of health problems resulting from the electronic revolution. By so doing, we can begin to understand and address problems such as cyberbullying, digital harassment, and digital sexual harassment, and the important role these play in traditional violence prevention today. On school campuses, officials must acknowledge and respond immediately to incidents when they are reported, have a support team available to gather as much information as possible - including details of any electronic communication - and support the victims of these crimes. Campuses also need to have written rules and procedures to deal with assaults on campus by members of their community and these policies need to be updated to include the burgeoning involvement of digital technologies in such incidents.

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