

# Cyberbullying Research Summary

## Cyberbullying and Strain



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School bullying has long been a concern among parents, educators, and students alike. Accordingly, many researchers have focused a significant amount of attention on this topic over the past three decades. Over the past decade, though, teens have begun to utilize technology as a tool to harass and mistreat their peers. *Cyberbullying*, it has been argued, can be even more detrimental to youth because: (1) bullies can be anonymous, (2) victims are accessible 24/7, (3) it is often easier to be cruel when corresponding electronically due to the physical distance, and (4) victims feel helpless in responding the threats as they perceive adults ill-equipped to assist them.<sup>1</sup>

The current study uses a popular contemporary criminological theory—general strain theory (GST)—to contribute to what is known about the factors associated with both traditional and nontraditional (electronic) forms of bullying. GST argues that individuals who experience strain, and as a result of that strain feel angry or frustrated, are more at risk to engage in criminal or deviant behavior.<sup>2</sup> As such, the primary question examined here is “Are youth who experience strain more likely to engage in bullying?”

Although a few previous studies have examined bullying as a *source* of strain,<sup>3,4</sup> no study has yet examined bullying as a potential *outcome* of strain. Nevertheless, there is good reason to explore this relationship. According to Agnew,<sup>5-109</sup> experiencing strain “makes us feel bad; that is, it makes us feel angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, and the like. These bad feelings create pressure for corrective action; we want to do something so that we will not feel so bad.” Clearly, bullying others—whether in person or online—is one such corrective action strained youth might adopt.

Second, GST is purported to be one of a select few “general theories of crime” capable of explaining a wide variety of deviant behaviors (which would include bullying). Moreover, bullying itself has been linked to broader delinquent outcomes of the type more-commonly studied by criminologists. For example, teens who bully others are four times more likely to appear in court on delinquency-related charges than their non-bullying counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, bullying is associated with other forms of antisocial behavior such as vandalism, shoplifting, truancy, dropping out of school, fighting, and drug use,<sup>6-9</sup> as well as negative emotions which are sometimes resolved in

deviant ways.<sup>6, 10-12</sup> With this in mind, it is hypothesized that some youth may engage in bullying behaviors (both traditional and nontraditional) as a response to strainful life events and the negative emotions that they produce.

### Results

In our research involving approximately 2,000 randomly-selected middle-schoolers from one of the largest school districts in the United States, a meaningful number of adolescents reported participating in bullying behaviors. The most-frequently cited type of bullying reported was “I called another student mean names, made fun of or teased him or her in a hurtful way” (27.7%). In all, more than one-third (34.1%) of students reported engaging in traditional bullying two or more times during the previous 30 days. Cyberbullying was also relatively common among these middle-schoolers. More than 21% of respondents reported cyberbullying others two or more times during the previous 30 days, with “I posted something online about another person to make others laugh” being the most-frequently reported form (22.8%).

### Highlights from the Research:

- Youth who are angry or frustrated are significantly more likely to bully or cyberbully others
- Youth who experience strain are significantly more likely to bully or cyberbully others
- Youth need ways to cope with stress stemming from peer conflict in a positive and healthy manner.

Next, the relationship between strain and traditional and nontraditional forms of bullying was analyzed. Both strain and anger/frustration were significantly related to traditional bullying, even after controlling for the effects of gender, race, and age. That is, youth who experienced strain or anger and frustration were more likely to bully others than those who had not experienced strain or anger/frustration. Similarly, youth who reported strain or anger/frustration were more likely to participate in cyberbullying.

## Discussion

GST argues that individuals who experience strain and its resultant negative emotions are at risk to engage in deviant behavior – such as bullying and cyberbullying. Like many previous studies, the current work found partial support for the theory's explanatory relevance.

Results from the current study point to several recommendations. To preempt youth from attempting to reconcile strainful circumstances and negative emotions in an unconstructive or deviant manner, schools should provide health education programming and emotional self-management skills to reduce the likelihood of significant strain resulting from interpersonal strife and conflict (including those occurring online).

Also, research has shown that adolescents between ages 11 and 15 increasingly cope with strain in maladaptive ways, such as resignation, avoidance, and hostility.<sup>13, 14</sup> As such, youth-serving adults must make available positive outlets to provide youth with a way to disengage from what weighs them down. This might include physical or mental extracurricular activities that occupy students' time and help them find satisfaction and self-worth in exploring personal interests.<sup>15, 16</sup>

Interpersonal aggression remains a significant issue as youth navigate the difficult waters of their formative years. If strain or negative emotions independently exacerbate the problem among this population, these findings illuminate at least two specific areas that demand attention and focused response by individuals and organizations looking to identify contributing factors. As such, it is hoped that the current research can help shape policy and practice as youth-serving adults work to reduce the incidence, intensity, and impact of bullying—both offline and online.

*Note: This Fact Sheet is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article entitled "Traditional and nontraditional bullying among youth: A test of General Strain Theory" which is forthcoming in Youth & Society.*

### Suggested citation:

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## Notes

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The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>. © 2010 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin