



**Parliament of Australia
Joint Select Committee on cyber-safety**

Inquiry into cyber-safety

June 2010

Alex Wildman took his own life. According to the investigating coroner, bullying played a significant role in this 14 year old boy's decision to suicide. An inquest into his death heard that bullying at school and on the Internet played a significant role in this young person's death. The bullying included several physical assaults, as well as taunts and threats posted by students on a social networking site. (Sydney Morning Herald, 17 June 2010).

Chanelle Rae took her own life. Her mother has no doubt that cyber bullying was responsible for the death of her 14 year old daughter. "Friday night she was on the Internet and told me about some message that had come through, and she wanted to die because of the message. If she didn't go on the Internet Friday night, she'd be alive today" (Karen Rae, Chanelle Rae's mother, ABC News, 23 July 2009).

Allem Halkic took his own life. The 17 year old's suicide followed death threats received online from his former friend. His former friend was charged and sentenced with sending threatening messages to Allem with the Police prosecutor stating that cyber-bullying "has become almost a plague in our community". Outreach worker Les Twentyman said in the past eight months he knew of 10 teenagers who had killed themselves after being bullied by people online, mainly at social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook (The Australian, 9 April 2010).

Introduction

The Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) is the peak, national non-government organisation representing and promoting the interests of the Australian mental health sector, committed to achieving better mental health for all Australians. The membership of the MHCA includes national organisations of mental health service consumers, carers, special needs groups, clinical service providers, community and private mental health service providers, national research centres and state/territory peak mental health bodies.

This submission will focus upon the impact of negative cyber experiences upon the mental health and wellbeing of young people. This will focus predominantly on the issues surrounding cyber-bullying and the effects that this destructive behaviour can have on a young person. The risk of suicide and attempted-suicide will be highlighted with evidence presented from the latest national and international research.

Finally, the MHCA will make a number of recommendations regarding actions needed to prevent cyber-bullying, based on best-practice.

The Facts

In 2009, the Child Health Promotion Research Centre, together with Edith Cowan University published a Review of Existing Australian and International Cyber-Safety Research. They pointed out the now widespread access to the Internet, with over 11 million Australians using it as an integral part of their personal, social and occupational activities. In reviewing the national and international literature they highlighted the positives and negatives of Internet use, revealing the significant gaps in cyber-safety research. Because of the gaps in Australian research, they found it necessary to define the prevalence and extent of cyber-safety risks in Australia by extrapolating this data from overseas research findings.

The research by Edith Cowan University into cyber-safety reported on five major risk areas including:

1. Cyberstalking, grooming and sexual solicitation
2. Cyber-bullying
3. Exposure to illegal and inappropriate material
4. Promotion of inappropriate social and health behaviours
5. Identity theft, privacy and online security.

Each of these areas poses a great risk to young people using the Internet, with the potential impact upon their mental health and wellbeing being catastrophic both immediately and chronically. Some of the extrapolated figures from the Edith Cowan University (2009) research have been presented below as the latest available research in this area.

Cyber-stalking

- Exact prevalence rate in Australia is unknown, but one study indicates that prevalence of online stalking is 5% compared with 54% of offline stalking (Sheridan & Grant, 2007).
- Estimates from the US, UK and Australia combined indicate approximately 7% of people were being subjected to cyber-stalking behaviours.
- Very few researchers have published research data on cyber-stalking in Australia making it difficult to estimate prevalence rates.
- Cyber-stalking can loosely be defined to include behaviours that include unwanted emails and malicious web posts about another person.
- There appears to be a relationship between bullying and stalking. Stalking episodes are sometimes preceded by bullying interactions (Purcell et al 2009)

Online grooming/sexual solicitation

- Non-incarcerated offenders who sexually solicit minors are:
 - Other adolescents (43-48%)
 - Young adults between 18-21 years (20-30%), and
 - Other adults (4-9%).
- Incarcerated offenders who sexually solicit minors are:
 - 18-25 years of age (23%)
 - 26-39 years of age (41%), and
 - 40+ years of age (35%).
- Most offenders who initiate sexual contact via the Internet met their victims in chat rooms (Wolak et al 2003).
- Online offenders who solicit teenagers may differ somewhat from offenders who solicit law enforcement officers posing online as teenagers (Mitchell et al 2005).

Cyber-bullying

- Prevalence rates of less than 10% in Australia have been reported.
- International prevalence rates as high as 52% have been reported.
- Currently, there is inconclusive evidence in relation to gender differences in engaging in cyber-bullying behaviours and being the victim of cyber-bullying behaviours.
- Although most (up to 82%) victims know the identity of the perpetrator, anonymity is an important factor in cyber-bullying behaviours.
- Engaging in cyber-bullying behaviours increases with age with UK estimates ranging from 8% in year 7 to 23% in years 10-11.

Source: Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University 2009

It is clear when looking at the research by Edith Cowan University (2009) that the prevalence of cyber-crimes in Australia is largely unknown. This could be due to the lack of research in this area to date. Certainly, if the emerging international research is anything to go by, it is clear that the risk to

young Australians is a serious one with action required to minimise the psychological, social and physical harm to our youth.

Cyber-bullying

Bullying is not a new phenomenon; it has been insidiously threaded into most cultures, probably for as long as cultures have existed. Old-school bullying relied upon the perpetrator and victim to be face to face. While face to face bullying is serious in nature, the victim could have moments of escape where they could avoid being directly victimised, at least physically. With technology came social networking sites. Used positively, websites such as Facebook, You Tube, and My Space are useful to keep friends socially connected in these times where most of us are time poor. The down side, of course, is that users of these sites are open and contactable by those with both good and bad intentions.

Unfortunately, this technology has meant that the bullies now have an easy mechanism with which to inflict pain and suffering upon whomever may be in their sight at a given time. Because of the Internet's availability and anonymity, it is easy for an offender to target their victim and difficult for a victim to avoid their perpetrator/s. The worst case scenario is that the victim becomes so overwhelmed by this behaviour that they decide the only option is suicide. Sadly, the three examples at the start of this submission were easy to find with many, many similar stories out there. The constant theme was every young person had been a victim of cyber-bullying in the short period prior to their decision to take their life.

Hinduja & Patchin (2009) refer to this type of suicide as cyberbullicide – meaning a suicide indirectly or indirectly influenced by experiences with online aggression. Of course, it is not the case that every case of cyber-bullying leads to suicide, however given the evidence of the strong relationship between traditional bullying and suicidal ideation (Roland 2002; Kim et al 2005) it certainly warrants further examination.

A study of 2000 United States middle-school students found that 20% of students reported serious thoughts of attempting suicide (19.7% females, 20.9% males) while 19% reported having previously attempted suicide (17.9% females, 20.2% males) (Hinduja & Patchin 2009). They found that all forms of bullying were significantly associated with increases in suicidal ideation but that cyber-bullying victims were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to youth who had not experienced it. The authors observed that many of the students whose suicide followed a period of being bullied had other emotional and social issues in their lives too. This is not surprising but provides a flag for the parents, teachers and peers of young people.

Cyberbullying.us defines cyber-bullying as “wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” (<http://safety.lovetoknow.com>). The National Crime Prevention Council suggests that more than 50% of teenagers living in the United States are exposed to cyber-bullying in some way. The following statistics are presented on Cyberbullying.us:

- 33 percent of youth have been victimised by cyber-bullying;
- Being ignored and disrespected were the most common cited forms of cyber-bullying;
- The primary source/location for cyber-bullying was in chat rooms (56%), followed by instant messaging (IM) (49%) and email (28%);
- Youth admitting to being victims of cyber-bullying expressed feeling frustrated (34%), angry (30%) and sad (22%);
- Forty-one percent of victims being cyber-bullied stated that they did not tell anyone that they were being bullied;
- Of those who did tell someone, only 19 percent felt that the situation improved as a result;

- Seventeen percent of respondents admitted to bullying someone online themselves.

The impact of cyber-bullying can be devastating to a young person's life, negatively impacting on their grades, emotional state, self-esteem and school attendance.

In a study by Arsenaault et al (2008) of 116 monozygotic twin pairs between 7-9 years old, it was found that being bullied at a young age was a contributing factor to children internalising their problems. Although this study was not conducted in relation to cyber-bullying, it is a reasonable assumption that the impact would be similar regardless of the medium being used. The key recommendation to come out of this research was that intervention programs aimed at reducing bullying behaviour in schools may be effective in reducing symptoms of mental health problems. It should also be noted that the psychological impact of bullying may not be limited to the immediate victims, but also to their peers who observe this behaviour (Rivers et al 2009).

The Australian National Centre Against Bullying recently held their 4th Biennial Conference 2010, *Navigating the Maze: cybersafety and wellbeing solutions for schools*. The main finding from the conference was that bullying affects everybody and that a national commitment is needed to increase cybersafety and reduce bullying across the community. They recommended ten steps as part of a process to achieve this outcome:

1. Early intervention
2. Training teachers
3. An appropriate legal framework
4. Increased focus on school transition
5. A whole-school approach
6. A whole-community approach
7. Young people to be part of the solution
8. Technology to be part of the solution
9. Support for ongoing research in Australia
10. Federal funding.

Clearly the focus of these recommendations relates to intervention and prevention both at the micro and macro level. They also recommend that funding by the federal government is required to ensure that these changes are implemented as a result of current research findings.

Although there has only been limited research conducted in Australia in relation to cyber-bullying, it is clear from the international research and also traditional bullying research that the impact upon children and young people is serious. With offenders being able to gain access to their victims in ways not possible prior to the Internet, it is imperative to ensure systems are in place to minimise the dangers to victims. The impact of cyber-bullying upon young people who are not adequately skilled to deal with this harassment means that they are at risk of developing psychological problems. Unfortunately, there have been too many examples of the unbearable pain suffered by these young people leading to their decision to end their own life.

Recommendations

The MHCA has identified three priority areas which they consider to be the areas requiring immediate action.

1. Considerable federal investment into research to properly record the incidence of cyber-bullying and its impact upon young people in Australia.

2. The development of relevant prevention and intervention programs designed to minimise the risk of harm to young people using the Internet. These should be based upon the latest national and international research and directed towards young people.
3. The development of training and awareness packages for parents, teachers and others working with young people. This training would relate to cyber-safety issues as well as providing information to assist in identifying youth who may be at-risk and be able to take the necessary action to be able to prevent the escalation of their situation.

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