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Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

Understanding and Addressing the Health Impacts of Online Abuse and Harassment

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Virtual Workshop

Workshop Background & Goals

Online harassment and abuse are increasingly widespread in the highly digitally connected world, encompassing many forms of violence that traditionally have occurred in other contexts, and the effects on both mental and physical health can be devastating. However, it is important to note that these experiences and their consequences are not equally distributed across the population. Individuals from minoritized social identities disproportionately experience online harassment and abuse. NIH is committed to supporting research to better understand the health impacts of online harassment and abuse to inform intervention efforts to ensure online safety.

The goal of this workshop is to identify gaps and challenges for advancing the research agenda on the health impacts of online harassment and abuse. Presentations and discussions focused on five key areas: (1) understanding the health impacts of online abuse and harassment; (2) meeting the needs of vulnerable and under-resourced populations; (3) lessons learned from related research areas; (4) potential collaborations to tackle online abuse and harassment; and (5) research approaches for prevention and intervention.

Key Points and Themes

- Online and in-person harassment often occur in similar ways. However, online forms of harassment can spread widely and quickly, and the content (e.g., images, posts, messages), can remain indefinitely and can be revisited by the victim, potentially increasing the harm.

- Both online and offline forms of harassment and abuse occur in similar settings (e.g., among youth in schools), and are linked with poor health outcomes. The consequences of in-person harassment have been studied for many years, and research focused on online abuse have found similar negative consequences. More research is needed to better understand the potential additive and/or interactional effects of online and in-person abuse.

- Online harassment may be perpetrated by individuals or groups who are not personally known by the victim, but can also include people the victim knows in person. Youth are more likely to experience in-person abuse and harassment than online. However, online abuse is prevalent, and experiences of it are nuanced and require careful consideration and exploration. Having thoughtful conversations with youth about their experiences in a wide variety of context (e.g., home, school) is critical. Open communication, particularly among youth and their caregivers and teachers is critical because youth might hide problems online out of fear that their devices could be taken away or limited.

- Although online abuse and harassment can occur across platforms, attack types, and media, online spaces may be particularly unsafe for women, nonbinary individuals, people of color, individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+, and youth. In particular, Black adolescents frequently experience online racism, which is linked to mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. Those who serve youth must be sensitive to their unique needs and contexts.

- Although online spaces may facilitate abuse and harassment, the benefits of digital engagement—such as the ability to find social support, identity-related connection, or health information, particularly for those who have difficulty finding these in person—should not be discounted.

- Many adolescents express that they cannot think clearly enough to take protective steps in the moment when online harassment occurs. Within-group online interactions may also be stressful; for example, in-group harassment may center on whether a participant is seen as performing the shared identity correctly. Understanding the dynamics of these online interactions would help researchers determine how to best help youth use these spaces in healthy ways. Opportunities for intervention may also exist when teens express on social media platforms that they are struggling with mental health challenges.

- A large infrastructure exists for responding to those who experience in-person intimate partner violence, but no parallel infrastructure exists for those who experience online abuse despite the significant overlap between these groups. Advocates who typically focus on the immediate threats associated with intimate partner violence often feel unequipped to address online abuse and harassment, as they often require both emotional support and technical assistance to help survivors. Collecting information on crime at the state level is difficult, so researchers cannot gain a holistic view of the problems at the level where the bulk of the harm occurs or conduct a comprehensive analysis of these crimes throughout the country.

- Crimes that have historically been committed in-person, such as stalking, can now be committed virtually using new technologies. Relatively little is known about the prevalence, severity, or characteristics of these crimes. The legal system is slow to catch up and not always equipped to help. New approaches are needed in the criminal justice system to develop education campaigns that move away from notions of "stranger danger" and emphasize trainings that help build trust when working with survivors.

- Online harassment prevention strategies must be rooted in the long-standing data on preventing in-person harassment and must target all levels of the social ecology to address the overlap between online and in-person experiences. Violence prevention strategies have leaned on individual-level strategies for a long time but now are shifting to integrate community-level, policy, and social norm–related strategies. For example, programs designed to target cyberbullying also successfully reduce in-person bullying, suggesting that cyberbullying prevention should be included in all bullying prevention programs. Prevention strategies also may need to adapt to better reflect current data on risk and protective factors, given that much online harassment is perpetrated by known individuals.

- Protective factors against online harassment include school belonging and safety, adult–child connection at schools, and perceived social norms supportive of positive bystander behavior. In social contexts permissive of violence and discrimination, online harassment is also prevalent. If the social norm in schools shifts so that youth are more willing to act as positive bystanders, they also would be more likely to do so online. Contexts that foster social connection and belonging are protective against harassment, so efforts to increase connection and belonging are powerful levers that could have a ripple effect across online harassment.

- Various forms of violence and abuse have similar and shared risk factors. Yet, more research is needed to better understand whether intervention strategies developed for one form of in-person violence will have impacts on online abuse and harassment prevention. There is evidence that a significant number of male perpetrators of mass shootings have a history of intimate partner or related violence towards women, in some cases including online harassment and abuse. These connections point to potential influences of socialization and other sociocultural risk factors combined with the potential role of online spaces serving to set the stage for in person violence. These connections warrant further exploration and research to better understand, and ultimately prevent such occurrences.

- Many LGBTQIA+ adolescents report using adult-oriented dating apps when seeking social support, community connection, and information on LGBTQIA+ sexual expectations. Sexual exploration and partner seeking is developmentally normative. Creators of dating apps should be aware that teens may use them, and key safety concerns should be addressed, in addition to potentially working to design these apps with teen use in mind.

- More researchers are needed who have expertise in the context and history of aggression and structural violence and discrimination against people of color and other historically underserved populations.

- Many youth are vulnerable to misinformation and are uninterested in looking for opinions outside their social circle. Teens also report trusting celebrities and influencers more than institutions. Interventions designed to shift cultural norms that engage these public figures should be considered.

- Novel digital literacy training is needed, as school-based training on digital literacy often is outdated. Teaching youth about online literacy before they begin seeing misinformation online—or "pre-bunking"—is more effective than trying to change their minds later. This may be especially important with respect to recognizing and responding to online racism, for both white and minoritized youth.

- Evidence suggests that most teens believe social media should have age restrictions but profess less support for parental consent or time restrictions. Research also shows that youth want more choices and opportunities to filter the content they see online, but effective filtering tools are extremely difficult to design. People do not agree on what they consider offensive, and context—such as offline events or global views—make it difficult to create universal filters.

- In addition, use of sharable or publicly available data sets regarding online harassment is important but complicated because of privacy and security considerations. Thus, interdisciplinary research that integrates expertise in technology with that of adolescent development, mental health, social relationships and violence/abuse is needed to pursue innovative solutions. Algorithmic presentation of content has become integral to the digital experience, so understanding algorithmic design will require involvement of both computer and social and behavioral scientists, both in collaboration of research and knowing where to search for relevant knowledge outside of one's primary discipline. Allowing researchers to fail quickly and implement new strategies rapidly is important because of the speed at which digital spaces change, so mechanisms are needed that allow for flexible design and upfront collaboration with software development companies.

- Expectations for collaboration should be defined at the beginning of a project, because the many systems and disciplines required to address online harassment often have different goals and procedures, and no shared language around online abuse has been defined. Common definitions, better ways to measure across spheres, and a common understanding of the problem are required to advance solutions.