



The rates of ownership of digital devices and the reliance on technology for daily activities has risen in recent years. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 85 percent of Americans own cell phones, 76 percent own a computer, and almost 50 percent own a gaming system.<sup>i</sup> All of these devices can be used to communicate and store data and do other useful things. They can also be used to commit cyberbullying.

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## LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CYBERBULLYING

### What is cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is "willful and repeated harm inflicted through use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."<sup>iii</sup> Harm is inflicted when an individual is harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, threatened, or tormented using digital technology. Cyberbullying is not limited to Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, or other social networks on the Internet; it also includes using cell phones for text messages and photos, or computers to transmit e-mails and instant messages. Cyberbullying is also known as electronic bullying (e-bullying), mobile or digital bullying, and online or Internet bullying. It differs from traditional bullying in that victims can be bullied at any location, any time of the day or night, and can be anonymous. Also, cyberbullying messages and/or images can be distributed immediately to a wide audience. Cyberbullying is most common among children ages 12 to 17, but it may also involve adults. Adults accused of harassing children or teens are generally referred to as cyberharassers or cyberstalkers.<sup>iii</sup> Research reveals that e-communication is an integral part of adolescent social life. Teens use the Internet for school work, cell phones to communicate, social networks to post content or schedule events, and mobile devices to stay connected with their peers. The significance of e-communication in the lives of children makes them targets for involvement in cyberbullying. Thirty-two percent of online teens report experiencing some type of online harassment. Twenty-six percent of teens have been harassed through their cell phones either by voice or text.<sup>iv</sup> Twenty-three percent of youth are bullied both in school and online—often by the same perpetrators.<sup>v</sup>

### How can law enforcement impact cyberbullying?

It is important that law enforcement take a proactive approach to cyberbullying. Unfortunately, the legislation governing the use of social or mobile media has not kept pace, thus leaving law enforcement at a disadvantage when encountering such cases. Here are a few things police can do:

- Become familiar with laws in your state. Forty-one states have laws that address bullying.

- Self-educate. It is incumbent upon law enforcement to learn as much and as soon as possible because technology-related crimes progress at alarming speeds. Research the elements of the activity to see if a remedy can be found in state criminal codes.
- Educate the community. Teach children, parents, school officials, and others how to prevent and respond to cyberbullying. Invite national organizations or local programs to share resources and coordinate presentations within your jurisdiction. If possible, implement an evidence-based bullying prevention program.
- Collaborate with school administrators and Parent Teacher Student Associations. Work with them to develop clear and responsive policies on the use of electronic media on and off campus, on how students can safely report cyberbullying, and on what remedies are available for suspects and victims. This policy also should define the roles of school and law enforcement officials, outline penalties for students, and detail parental notification.
- Train officers. Teach them how to confiscate devices used by suspects in the commission of cyberbullying, get access to or secure electronic data, and report cyberbullying; these are critical steps in building cyberbullying cases.
- Share information with other law enforcement agencies. Team up with departments that have experience with cyberbullying cases, and share information with departments in neighboring jurisdictions to prevent duplication in case processing and to educate contiguous communities.

<sup>i</sup>The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, "Topics," 2010, accessed November 1, 2010, at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Topics.aspx>.

<sup>iii</sup>Cyberbullying Research Center, "About Us," 2010, accessed January 19, 2010, at <http://cyberbullying.us/aboutus.php>.

<sup>iv</sup>Bullying Statistics. 2010. Welcome to Bullying Statistics. Accessed January 19, 2010 at <http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/>.

<sup>v</sup>Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, "Teens and Mobile Phones," by Amanda Lenhart, Rich Ling, Scott Campbell, and Kristen Purcell, 2010, accessed September 20, 2010, at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Teens-and-Mobile-Phones.aspx>.

<sup>vi</sup>M. L. Ybarra, M. Diener-West, and P. J. Leaf, "Examining the Overlap in Internet Harassment and School Bullying: Implications for School Intervention," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 41 (6 Suppl 1; December 2007): S42-50.