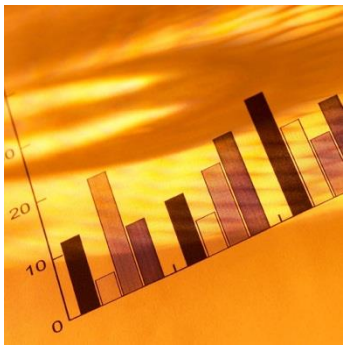
RESEARCH SUMMARY

Cyberbullying Programs – An Environmental Scan



2020–S001

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Background

With increased access to the Internet, the widespread use of smart phones, and growing use of social media platforms, cyberbullying has emerged as a new form of bullying with a range of negative consequences for victims, including: lower self-esteem, poor self-concept, poor school performance and higher likelihood of dropping out, social isolation and withdrawal, anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal ideation.

As a result, Public Safety Canada engaged *Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group* to gather information about existing programs designed to address cyberbullying among children (ages 6-11), youth (ages 12-17), and young adults (ages 18-25) in Canada or abroad.

Method

Based on the literature review, online search, and input from cyberbullying experts, 98 cyberbullying programs were initially identified. Programs were screened according to rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in a sample of 35 programs for further review. Program profiles, including information about the program structure, target audience, theoretical basis and measures of effectiveness, were developed for each.

Findings

Fewer than one third of the programs reviewed focused exclusively on cyberbullying. Most are bullying programs that include or add on a cyberbullying component.

Cyberbullying programs can be divided into three broad and sometimes overlapping categories:

- Class-based programs are implemented in individual classrooms with no explicit attempt to implement the intervention at a school-wide level (n=19).
- Whole-school/community programs involve school-wide/district-wide policies and activities, with an explicit focus on engaging students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members (n=12).
- Technology-based interventions for individuals, working on their own or with others, that include applications, games, and other online initiatives (n=3).

Most cyberbullying programs have been implemented on a small scale (n=17), but a few have been implemented at the national (n=11) or international level (n=7).

Programs can be distinguished in terms of their relative emphasis on creating awareness of cyberbullying; developing knowledge about cyberbullying topics; and equipping participants with skills needed to address cyberbullying. Those skills typically include coping strategies, social skills, building respectful relationships, self-empowerment, and empathy.

Other programs focus on the school environment. Such programs aim to: create safe, respectful, bullying-free environments and policies; increase teacher capacity to address cyberbullying and bullying issues; or increase parents' knowledge and awareness (n=20).

The number of sessions and the duration of programs varies considerably from a few sessions to those conducted over an extended period, with some programs operating for the full school year.

Most programs (n=19) highlight the multiple roles that students play in cyberbullying. Most programs reveal that a much larger percentage of youth reported both

victimizing others online and being victimized themselves when compared to traditional, face-to-face bullying.

Evaluations of the effectiveness of cyberbullying programs suggest that programs can reduce cyberbullying by 10% to 15% and cyberbullying victimization by approximately 14% (Gaffney et al., 2019). While several cyberbullying programs (n=20) have been evaluated for effectiveness, systematic attempts to test the theoretical underpinnings of cyberbullying programs are largely absent. When programs are found to be effective, the absence of a coherent underlying theory of change leaves gaps in our understanding of how or why the program has been successful.

Implications

The literature on cyberbullying provides a number of lessons that may prove helpful in selecting or designing programs to address cyberbullying.

1. Providing operational definitions of cyberbullying and cybervictimization, along with concrete examples, can support program effectiveness.

Developing both general and operational definitions would allow programs to identify the general aspects of cyberbullying while also precisely specifying the behaviour involved.

2. Program outcomes should be well-defined and closely linked with the definition of cyberbullying.

An effective cyberbullying program should have an observable impact on behaviour. Outcome measures should focus on behavioural changes that are in line with the operational definitions of cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

3. Traditional bullying and cyberbullying differ in important ways. Efforts to address cyberbullying must consider both commonalities and differences with traditional bullying.

For both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, prevention and intervention efforts need to address a range of issues, including impact and consequences, bystander behaviour, empathy, victim coping, reporting, social norms, school rules and policies. At the same time, cyberbullying is not simply an online version of traditional bullying. The anonymous, permanent and omni-present nature of online communication make issues of power, repetition, and intent very different from traditional bullying. Effective programming must disentangle and address the unique features associated with cyberbullying.

4. Proposed solutions to cyberbullying should be anchored by an explicit and coherent theory of change that is systematically tested.

In order to change a phenomenon, it is important to understand it. Recurrent behaviour like cyberbullying is typically composed of a variety of factors. Understanding what these factors are and how they contribute, individually and in combination with other factors to support the undesirable behaviour, is an essential step in trying the change the behaviour. However, few programs identified in this scan attempted to explain why cyberbullying occurs or to describe the factors that elicit cyberbullying.

5. Cyberbullying is complex and connected to social, emotional and cognitive development. As a result, narrowly focused programs are largely ineffective.

Connections between risk-taking behaviours and adolescents' relationships with peers, parents and others present an opportunity to target multiple risk-taking behaviours (gender violence, substance use, bullying, cyberbullying, etc.) by promoting the components of healthy relationships and effective communication. In addition to addressing linkages to other adolescent risk-taking behaviours, effective programs must also address the specific aspects of online communication/behaviour.

6. Cyberbullying programs must be age appropriate and sensitive to vulnerable populations.

Age should be an important consideration in the development of cyberbullying programming. As well, some groups are more vulnerable than others to cyberbullying, e.g., LGBTQ2 identified youth. Online communication can be highly beneficial to isolated and otherwise excluded youth; however, it may also make them more susceptible to cyberbullying. The implementation of class-wide or school-wide programs seems predicated on the assumption that factors such as age, sexual/gender identity, and ethno-linguistic

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background can be addressed without specific reference to them, but this is likely incorrect.

7. Program context and delivery make a difference.

Cyberbullying programs implemented in safe and welcoming contexts are more likely to succeed. With respect to program delivery, adults are rarely perceived as credible authorities in the digital domain. Engaging older students to deliver peer-to-peer program components, particularly about aspects of the program that are related to technology, is highly recommended. As well, engaging youth, including vulnerable youth, in the design, implementation and evaluation of the program (particularly the peer-to-peer component) should be strongly considered.

8. It is important to consider scalability and sustainability over time.

There is a range of considerations in "scaling up" programs, including: recurrent costs; displacement of the established curriculum; and meeting and matching the expectations of those responsible for program implementation. Involving those responsible for implementation in the design of the program increases the chances that it can be brought to scale.

9. Those implementing cyberbullying programs require subject-specific and pedagogical knowledge, and systematic preparation for program implementation.

Many programs emphasize materials (lessons and resources) at the expense of instructor preparation. Programs cannot be faithfully implemented without adequate training. Fidelity of implementation is a concern in the area of cyberbullying because teachers and other adults often feel less knowledgeable about digital technologies than do youth. Involving youth in the planning and implementation stages would improve overall effectiveness, provided they receive adequate training as well.

10. The behaviours taught in cyberbullying programs must be compatible with participants' behavioural repertoire. Participants should be motivated to acquire the desirable behaviour or shed the undesirable behaviour. New behaviours should be ones that are supported by proper role models.

Some of the programs devoted to cyberbullying overlook two factors that are known to be important to persuasion and behaviour change: reference groups and behaviour repetition. Groups to which a person looks to as a reference for her/his own behaviour will have a stronger influence than other groups. As well, changing one's behaviour requires many successful repetitions; accordingly, participants should have multiple opportunities to apply new behaviours, gain feedback, and assess the value/effectiveness of new behaviours.

Many programs that seek to address cyberbullying are of short duration, do not include special preparations or considerations for vulnerable groups, and appear superficial in their treatment of underlying root causes. Thus, they are likely to be ineffective. Systematic and programmatic evaluation is needed to assess the impact on both the general population and particularly vulnerable subgroups, as well as to evaluate the value of individual program components in order to determine what actually works and in what context.

Source

Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, LLP. (2019). *Cyberbullying – Environmental Scan.* Ottawa, ON: Public Safety Canada.

For more information on research at the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada, to get a copy of the full research report, or to be placed on our distribution list, please contact:

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Research Summaries are produced for the Community Safety and Countering Crime Branch, Public Safety Canada. The summary herein reflects interpretations of the report authors' findings and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Public Safety Canada.

2020–S001

ISSN: 1916-4009

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