Cyberbullying and adolescent well-being in England: a population-based cross-sectional study

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Summary

Background Bullying is a major public health problem. We aimed to estimate the prevalence of cyberbullying and traditional bullying among adolescents in England, and assess its relative effects on mental well-being.

Methods In this population-based study, we analysed data from a nationally representative cross-sectional study, What About Youth, which enrolled a random sample of 298 080 school pupils drawn from 564 886 National Pupil Database records of adolescents aged 15 years, living in England, with matching postcode and local authority data, to complete self-report surveys between Sept 22, 2014, and Jan 9, 2015. Mental well-being, defined as life satisfaction, fulfilling social relationships, purpose in life, and a subjective sense of flourishing, was assessed using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale and was compared between those adolescents who reported traditional bullying (including physical, verbal, and relational bullying) or cyberbullying 2–3 times a month or more compared with those adolescents who reported traditional bullying and cyberbullying once or twice in the past couple of months or less. Traditional bullying was defined as repeated, intentional aggression that is targeted at a person who cannot easily defend himself or herself; cyberbullying was additionally defined as taking place in an electronic context (eg, e-mail, blogs, instant messages, text messages).

Findings 120 115 eligible adolescents completed questionnaires, of whom 110 788 adolescents completed measures of bullying. 33 363 (adjusted: 30% total, 20 668 girls [36%, 12 695 [24%] boys) reported any form of regular bullying in the past couple of months. 29 302 (27% total, 17 745 [31%] girls, 11 557 [24%] boys) reported physical, verbal, and relational (ie, traditional) bullying only, while 406 (<1% total, 276 [<1%] girls, 130 [<1%] boys) reported only cyberbullying, and 3655 (3% total, 2647 [5%] girls, 1008 [2%] boys) reported both traditional and cyberbullying. Both kinds of victimisation were related to poorer mental well-being (adjusted analyses, traditional: b coefficient=–1.99 (SE 0.001); cyberbullying: b coefficient=–0.86 (0.06). Cybervictimisation accounted for less than 0.1% of observed variability in mental well-being compared with 5.0% of variability accounted for by traditional victimisation.

Interpretation Traditional bullying is considerably more common among adolescents in England than cyberbullying. While both forms of bullying were associated with poorer mental well-being, cyberbullying accounted for a very small share of variance after adjustment for offline bullying and other covariates.

Funding None.

Introduction Bullying is a major public health problem. Adolescents who are victimised by their peers are at increased risk of multiple negative health outcomes. Population attributable fractions in the range of 25–40% suggest that a substantial proportion of mental health problems, including depression and self-harm, might be attributable to bullying if this is a causal relationship.1 In view that children’s use of the internet has doubled in the past decade, many research has focused on the phenomenon of cyberbullying, defined here as repeated, intentional aggression that takes place in an electronic context (eg, e-mail, blogs, instant messages, text messages) and is targeted at a person who cannot easily defend himself or herself.2 Concerns have been raised that cyberbullying has the potential to cause more harm than traditional bullying due to the relative anonymity of perpetrators in many cases, larger audiences, increasing prevalence, and permanence of posted messages.3 Much debate remains over whether cyberbullying might be more or less strongly associated with harmful outcomes than traditional bullying.4

Prevalence rates of cyberbullying vary, partly because of the absence of a standardised definition and validated cutoffs, as well as non-nationally representative samples. A study by Vazsonyi and colleagues5 published in 2012 sampled 1032 UK students as part of a larger study of 9–16-year-olds from 25 European countries (EU Kids Online II Project) and reported that 8% self-reported having been cyberbullied compared with 21% reporting any form of traditional bullying. In a 2017 study of 2745 11–16-year-olds in five secondary schools in the Midlands, UK, 29% reported having been bullied in the past 6 months, but only 1% of adolescents reported only cyberbullying and no traditional bullying.6 Some studies have reported gender differences in prevalence rates, with girls reporting more cyberbullying victimisation than boys.7 This finding is in keeping with studies of traditional bullying involvement.8,9 Typically, boys have been reported to

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Research in context

Evidence before this study
We searched PsycINFO and MEDLINE to identify potential literature published in English before May 19, 2017, using the search string “(bull* OR bully* OR peer victimization) and (cyber*) and (prevalence)”. We identified 257 peer-reviewed articles in PsycINFO and 132 in MEDLINE, of which 95 provided relevant data for prevalence. Prevalence rates for cyberbullying were generally reported to be lower than for traditional bullying, although it has been suggested that cyberbullying might be on the rise. Few studies used nationally representative samples. Systematic reviews support an association between adolescent bullying and poor mental well-being outcomes. Some claim that cyberbullying might place adolescents at greater risk of poor mental well-being than traditional bullying, however, evidence is conflicting.

Added value of this study
Our nationally representative sample of 120,115 adolescents in England is, to the best of our knowledge, the largest study to date that examines the prevalence rates of traditional and cyberbullying. We found that prevalence rates of cyberbullying (4%) are lower than that of offline bullying (30%). Cyberbullying remained associated with poorer well-being after adjusting for the effects of traditional bullying, but accounted for only 0.1% of variance in well-being scores, compared with 5.0% for traditional bullying.

Implications of all the available evidence
Our results and previous literature support an association between bullying (cyberbullying and traditional) and poorer well-being. The findings support the need for evidence-based interventions that target both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Social media and internet connectivity are becoming an increasingly intrinsic part of modern childhood, and initiatives fostering resilience in online and every day contexts are needed.

Mental well-being is more than the absence of psychopathology or ill health, and reflects life satisfaction, fulfilling social relationships, purpose in life, and a subjective sense of flourishing. Mental well-being could be protective for a range of health outcomes, as well as increased educational attainment in childhood and adolescence, and better occupational functioning in adulthood. The promotion of mental well-being has large-scale social and economic benefits, placing this as an important component of public health policy. This notion is of particular relevance to the UK, which was recently ranked 20th of 27 European Union countries on the mental well-being index. The effect of bullying on adolescents’ mental well-being has been largely overlooked, with research focusing mainly on bullying as a risk factor for psychiatric morbidity. Whether cyberbullying is related to mental well-being independent of involvement in traditional bullying is unknown. The promotion of well-being is now one of the key UN Sustainable Development Goals, and an analysis of the relation between bullying and adolescent well-being is timely.

The aims of our research are three-fold. First, we report an up-to-date estimate of the prevalence of both traditional and cyberbullying among a large-scale, nationally representative sample of 15-year-olds in England. Second, we estimate the magnitude of the relations between these forms of bullying and mental well-being. Finally, we estimate the extent to which cyberbullying, a new medium for bullying behaviours, is related to mental well-being once the effect of more traditional forms of bullying has been accounted for.

Methods
Study design and participants
In this population-based cross-sectional study, data were collected as part of the What about Youth Study, which was conducted by the UK Health and Social Care Information Centre (now National Health Service Digital) between Sept 22, 2014, and Jan 9, 2015. Participants were identified using the UK’s Department for Education National Pupil Database. Fieldwork covered 150 local authorities across England with the aim of making sufficient observations to attain a 0.3% margin of error at a 95% CI for youths in England aged 15 years. A prenotification letter was sent to parents or carers of participants giving them the opportunity to opt their child out of the survey. As shown in figure 1, 120,115 participants responded with usable data through the use of paper (n=100,850) or online questionnaires (n=19,265) and sensitivity analyses comparing the direction and strength of the results for each method indicated the pattern of findings did not vary between these methods. Response rates were typical of large-scale surveys of this kind, and varied by sex, with adjusted response rates of 57,153 (35%) for boys and 62,962 (49%) for girls.

For the OECD Stat Better Life Index see http://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?DataSetCode=BLLI

For more on the What about Youth Study see http://www.whataboutyouth.com/who-we-are.aspx
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