Teen Dating Abuse and Harassment in the Digital World

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

Janine Zweig and Meredith Dank

One in four dating teens is abused or harassed online or through texts by their partners, according to the largest survey to date on the subject. New technologies—social networking sites, texts, cell phones, and e-mails—have given abusers another way to control, degrade, and frighten their partners. These tools haven't pushed overall abuse rates up, but have allowed abusers to harass their victims anywhere and at any time, even when they're apart.

Harassment and abuse in the digital world is also a red flag that something even more troubling may be happening. Beyond a cruel Facebook insult or harassing texts, a deeper pattern of abuse may be unfolding offline and in person. **Victims of digital abuse and harassment are 2 times as likely to be physically abused, 2.5 times as likely to be psychologically abused, and 5 times as likely to be sexually coerced.**

While researchers have been studying dating violence among teens for decades, few studies have focused on the role of technology in abuse and harassment. Urban Institute's study presents the most comprehensive research to date. We surveyed 5,647 teens—more than any previous analysis—and broadened our study to include both middle and high school students.

Understanding how many teens are affected and how they've been victimized gives communities a clearer picture of this type of abuse and harassment—and a starting point to address it.

How and Where Abuse Occurs

Abusers use technology to stalk their partners, send them degrading messages, embarrass them publicly, and pressure them for sex or sexually explicit photos. The study finds that the most frequent form of harassment or abuse was tampering with a partner's social networking account without permission. **Nearly 1 in 10 teens in relationships report having this happen to them in the past year.**

Unlike physical violence or psychological abuse, most digital abuse and harassment takes place away from school grounds. **Only 1 in 5 victims say they experienced digital abuse or harassment at school and during school hours.**

But while technology has given abusers a new way to control and intimidate their partners, it's rarely the only way they inflict harm. Our study finds that most victims of dating abuse and harassment through technology also experience other forms of violence or abuse from their partners. **About 84 percent of victims are psychologically abused by their partners, half are physically abused, and one-third experiences sexual coercion.**

> Victims of digital abuse and harassment are 2 times as likely to be physically abused, 2.5 times as likely to be psychologically abused, and 5 times as likely to be sexually coerced.

How Teens Get Abused and Harassed through Technology

- **Used my social networking account** without permission: reported by 8.7% of teens in relationships
- Sent me texts/e-mails/etc. to engage in **sexual acts I did not want:** 7.4%
- **Pressured me** to send a sexual or naked photo of myself: 6.8%
- **Sent threatening messages** to me: 6.1%
- Sent me so many messages it **made me feel unsafe:** 5.5%
- **Posted embarrassing photos** of me online: 5.5%
- **Wrote nasty things** about me on his or her profile page: 5.1%
- **Spread rumors about me** using a cell phone/e-mail/a networking site, etc.: 5.0%
- **Made me afraid** when I did not respond to my cell phone/texts/etc.: 4.2%
- **Sent sexual or naked photos** I did not want: 3.8%
- **Used information from my social networking** site to harass me: 3.7%
- Sent me instant messages or chats that **made me feel scared:** 3.4%
- Used a cell phone/text/etc. to **threaten to harm me physically:** 2.7%
- Took video of me and sent it to his or her friends **without my permission:** 2.6%
- **Threatened me if I did not send a sexual or naked photo** of myself: 2.6%
- Created a profile page about me **knowing it would upset me:** 1.3%

Only 4 percent experience digital abuse and harassment alone. So social media, texts, and e-mails don't seem to invite new abuse, they just provide abusers with a new tool.

What Educators, Parents, Advocates, and Teens Should Know

Students, parents, and school officials should be aware that any teen can be a victim of dating abuse and harassment through technology. Victims include girls and boys, middle school and high school students, and teens of all races and sexual orientations. What they have in common is that **few victims seek help or report being abused.** When they do, they are more likely to go to their friends for help.

What can be done to stop this abuse and harassment and help victims? The answer isn't shutting down social media sites or taking away teens' cell phones. While technology may open up avenues for dating abuse and harassment, it can also provide the most effective solutions to prevent it. **These same digital platforms can be tools to educate teens, spread the word about where to go for help, and give victims and witnesses a safe way to report abuse.**

Outreach is critical. Teens may not understand that dating abuse comes in different forms besides physical violence. Parents, teachers, principals, and peer leaders should raise awareness about the behavior that counts as abuse and harassment and the importance of seeking help. School faculty and staff should be trained to identify dating harassment and abuse and know how to help victims. And schools with computer labs should train teachers and students to block screen names, apply filters, and take other protective measures to discourage online abuse.

Because victims are more likely to go to friends for help or advice, schools might create peer groups to tell other students about dating abuse and harassment and to offer victims a comfortable place to report incidents.

Parents should also learn how to spot red flags. Online abuse may be harder to spot than physical abuse. Parents should be aware of how often teens communicate with their partners and should talk with them about the nature and content of the messages they receive.

Technology, particularly social networking sites and cell phones, plays a central role in teens' lives. It may evolve and change, but it is not going away. We need to know if experiencing particular forms of abuse through technology signals escalating violence in relationships. What puts youth at risk? And what causes abusers to carry out this behavior? Learning more will inform prevention and intervention programs that work to stop dating abuse and harassment. ■