

# Bullying

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School [bullying](#) has likely existed as long as schools themselves. The consequences of such bullying were once limited to name-calling and occasional schoolyard fights. In the twenty-first century, however, school bullying has taken a more serious turn; some bullied [students](#) turn to violence as a solution—through [suicide](#) or deadly acts carried out against their persecutors and other students. These tragedies have led to heightened awareness among parents, children, [educators](#), and law enforcement experts about the harmful short- and long-term effects of bullying. An increase in online [harassment](#), commonly called [cyberbullying](#), has drawn attention and resulted in some legislation to prosecute perpetrators.

## Bullied to the Brink

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School bullying can consist of physical violence against a student but more often involves ridicule and attempts to humiliate the targeted student in front of others. The victims are often students who are not part of an established social group at school, such as new students or those who suffer from health or learning disabilities. Bullying campaigns can also be waged over relationship issues such as jealousy. Bullying may be physical, verbal, relational (targeting reputations and relationships), or directed at property (such as taking or damaging items).

Bullying may have dire consequences. Phoebe Prince became the victim of bullying at her new high school in South Hadley, Massachusetts, after moving to the United States from Ireland in 2009. In addition to being a new student, Prince had briefly dated two different [boys](#) at the high school. She was subjected to bullying from at least one girl who had previously dated one of the boys as well as her female friends. At least one girl was suspended from school for threatening and harassing Prince, but school administrators did little else to stop the bullying. On January 14, 2010, after suffering continued harassment and an attempted physical assault, Prince went home and committed suicide by hanging herself.

Similar cases have been reported from other countries. Thirteen-year-old Kelly Yeomans of England was driven to suicide in 1997 when a group of boys in her neighborhood subjected her to relentless bullying due to her weight. Fourteen-year-old Canadian girl Dawn-Marie Wesley hanged herself in 2000 after three teenage [girls](#) repeatedly harassed and threatened her. One common link in all these cases is that the victims—and most of the bullies—are [teenage girls](#). A 2009 study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that about 20 percent of all [high school students](#) reported being bullied during the previous year and that girls were more likely than boys to be targeted as victims. These statistics remain fairly constant in later studies.

## Violent Retribution and Cyberbullying

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Sometimes, victims of bullying seek revenge by lashing out at others. The first widely known episode of mass shooting in a school was linked to bullying. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, ages eighteen and seventeen, entered Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, with several weapons and opened fire, killing thirteen people in the Colorado school before turning the guns on themselves. Based on journals and videos the two left behind, many experts have speculated that the boys, who were not an accepted part of any of the school's social groups, were victims of bullying who acted out against others as a way of striking back at society. Charles Andrew Williams, who killed two students and wounded thirteen more during a 2001 shooting spree at Santana High School in Santee, California, said afterward that he was tired of being bullied by other students.

Montana teen Deon Gillen reportedly committed suicide on 14 February 2016 after enduring two years of bullying at school. A doctor had diagnosed the seventeen-year-old boy, who had learning disabilities, with aggravated post-traumatic stress disorder caused by documented physical and psychological abuse. Two years before his death, his family filed a lawsuit against the Livingston School District for not protecting the teen.

Increasingly, bullying among teens is not limited to school grounds. Cyberbullying involves sending harassing e-mails or text messages, making derogatory social network postings, or even just revealing personal information about victims without their consent in an attempt to embarrass them. Cyberbullying is often carried out under the cloak of anonymity, since computer users can easily create aliases that hide their true identities. At times, cyberbullies threaten victims.

In 2006, a thirteen-year-old Missouri girl named Megan Meier struck up an online relationship with a sixteen-year-old boy named Josh who lived in a nearby town. The two communicated through the social network site MySpace for several weeks. They never met in person, but Meier bonded strongly with Josh. When Josh posted that he no longer wanted to be her friend—and suggested that the world would be better off without her—Meier hanged herself.

Several weeks later, a shocking truth was revealed: “Josh” did not exist: He was created by Lori Drew, the mother of one of Meier's former friends. Drew lived just four houses down the street from the Meiers and allegedly sought revenge against Megan, who no longer wanted to be friends with Drew's daughter. Although Drew was convicted of computer fraud and abuse in 2008, the verdict was overturned in 2009. At the time, most jurisdictions in the United States were not covered by cyberbullying laws, and Drew's actions—though harshly criticized by nearly everyone—were not regarded as illegal. According to a CDC study, about 15 percent of high school students reported being bullied electronically in 2013. Bullyingstatistics.org reported in 2016 that more than half of adolescents and teens have been bullied online.

In January 2016, fourteen-year-old Olivia Perryman killed herself after being bullied online. The York County, Pennsylvania, girl was grieving the loss of her father and reported being targeted by a cyberbully. The alleged bully created a fake online profile and pretended to be a boy who became her boyfriend. Perryman's mother wanted the perpetrator charged under a new state cyber harassment law that went into effect in September 2015.

# Bully-Victims and Bystanders

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Studies have shown that victims of bullying are frequently perpetrators as well. According to the CDC, these bully-victims are at greatest risk for suicide-related behavior of any individuals involved in bullying. These youths also account for the highest rates of negative mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, though researchers note this is not a clear causal relationship (which means studies cannot show the mental health issues are directly caused by bullying). Bullying results in a wide range of problems, such as causing students to miss school and fall behind in school work. Even uninvolved bystanders report feeling increased negative consequences, including helplessness.

The CDC notes that although punishing such behavior is necessary in school settings, professionals must take another approach to address the problem of bullying. Rather than blaming and shaming, professionals must look at the reasons for behavior and focus on getting help for youths involved and their families. Bystanders should be given the tools to help prevent violence, including concrete methods to safely influence their peers.

## Activism in the Aftermath

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As media reports of bullying and its tragic aftermath became all too common, lawmakers and activists have worked to reduce bullying in schools and stiffen penalties against bullies. As a direct result of Megan Meier's suicide, Missouri legislators unanimously passed a bill, known as "Megan's Law," that outlaws use of the [Internet](#) for purposes of harassment. In the cases of Dawn-Marie Wesley and Kelly Yeomans, at least some of the bullies who terrorized each girl were convicted of harassment and making threats.

In what is probably the most prominent recent case, that of Phoebe Prince, six teenagers were indicted as adults on a range of charges, including harassment, statutory rape, and assault. In addition, as a result of Prince's suicide, the Massachusetts legislature enacted one of the toughest antibullying laws in the nation on May 3, 2010. Among other measures, the bill required every school district in the state to submit a comprehensive antibullying plan by the end of 2010. Only about two-thirds of the school districts produced complete plans by the deadline. Despite broad support for the spirit of the antibullying law, some civil rights experts argue that it treads dangerously close to limiting free speech. They point out that bullying has been a common problem for generations and warn against the danger of criminalizing routine disagreements between students.

As of 2016, no federal law directly addresses bullying. State lawmakers and school officials have used education codes and school district policies to implement antibullying measures. Laws and policies vary by state. Some states include bullying as part of their criminal code. Federal harassment laws can apply if bullying involves prejudice based on race, sex, disability, or religion. Antibullying campaigns across the globe have also raised awareness and offer support and advice to victims of bullying.

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