

Behind the Screen Where Today's Bully Plays: Perceptions of College Students on Cyberbullying

Karen Pullet

Jamie Pinchot

Computer and Information Systems

Robert Morris University

Moon Township, PA 15108, USA

pullet@rmu.edu pinchot@rmu.edu

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study of 168 undergraduate students examined the perceptions of college students about cyberbullying. The study focused on students' knowledge of the topic, opinions about cyberbullying, and personal experiences they may have had as either a victim or a witness of cyberbullying. Reporting of cyberbullying incidents was also explored, and participants were asked to indicate what can or should be done to prevent cyberbullying.

Keywords: Social networking, Student perceptions, Student expectations

1. INTRODUCTION

Most people can probably remember a bully that harassed or threatened someone on the school playground. With traditional bullying the victim would come in contact, either verbally or physically, with the bully. Along with the progression of technology came a new form of bullying known as cyberbullying. The National Crime Prevention Council (2012) defines cyberbullying as "the process of using the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person." Cyberbullying occurs when youth repeatedly use technology to threaten or harass their peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010a).

While both bullying and cyberbullying have many things in common, there are some distinct differences. Unlike traditional forms of bullying where the victim is confronted by the bully, cyberbullying allows the offender to mask his or her identity behind the screen of a computer or mobile device (Donegan, 2011). The cyberbully can contact the victim by using anonymous email addresses, pseudonyms, or by creating fictitious accounts through the use of social media. Attacks on a victim of cyberbullying can potentially go viral, attracting a large audience of viewers who can potentially join in on the bullying. Cyberbullying has brought the bully into a person's private space, following them into their home, school, or while at play. With the use of modern technology the target can be harassed 24 hours per day. We live in a time where technology helps make our lives easier. But that same technology can also be abused, enabling this new form of bullying.

This exploratory study examined the perceptions of college students about cyberbullying, focusing on students'

knowledge of the topic as well as their personal experiences, both past and present. Students were asked to identify themselves as either a victim or a witness to cyberbullying of another person, and to provide their perceptions regarding experiences in one or both of those roles.

The study addressed two primary research questions:

RQ1: What experiences and reactions have students had as either victims or witnesses of cyberbullying?

RQ2: What are college students' perceptions of cyberbullying?

2. RELATED LITERATURE

Cyberbullying estimates among college students differ due to the varied focus of the researchers who have conducted studies on this topic (Molluzzo & Lawler, 2011). Approximately 34% of college students have been a victim, at some point in their lives, of cyberbullying, while 64% have been a witness to someone that has been a victim (Swearer, 2010; Molluzzo & Lawler, 2011).

Walker, Sockman, & Koehn (2011) directed an exploratory study in which they evaluated cyberbullying experiences of 120 undergraduate students. Fifty-four percent of all respondents indicated knowing someone who had been cyberbullied. Additionally, 11% of those surveyed reported being cyberbullied while attending the University. Of the students currently being bullied at the time of the survey, 57% were bullied less than four times, 29% four to ten times and 14% were bullied more than ten times. The study revealed that 50% of respondents were bullied by a classmate, 57% were bullied by someone outside of the University and 43% said that they did not know. The above

percentages do not add up to 100% with the theory being that victims were being bullied by more than one person.

Zacchilli and Valerio (2011) examined the knowledge and prevalence of cyberbullying. The study was distributed to 272 first time students at the University. Participants were asked about past experience of being a victim of bullying in which 36% reported that they were bullied in in elementary school. Thirty-three percent were bullied in middle school and 21% were bullied in high school in which traditional bullying and cyberbullying were equal. Only 1% of the sample reported that they had been bullied while in college. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding how they react to cyberbullying. For being a victim of cyberbullying, 9.2% of participants ignored the bully, 15.8% spoke with someone about the experience, 12% stated that they bullied the person who was bullying them and 17.2% said that they delete the messages. Additionally, students were asked if they reported being a victim of cyberbullying. Approximately, 19% told with a friend, 5% told a sibling, and 7% talked to a parent. Eighteen percent of victims stated that no one tried to stop them from being cyberbullied.

A study conducted by Burgess-Proctor, Hinduja, & Patchin (2010) in regard to cyberbullying victimization of adolescents, surveyed 3,141 female respondents under the age of 18. In their study, respondents were asked how often they knew the person bullying them online. Approximately 80% of adolescent girls knew the person that was bullying them. Victims of cyberbullying were also asked if they reported the incident. Sixty-five percent of victims that reported the incident confided in an online buddy or friend, while only 13% reported the incident to a parent or another adult.

Molluzzo and Lawler (2011) evaluated the perceptions of cyberbullying of 400 college students in which 121 were considered valid. The average age of the respondents was 19.5 years. Thirty-four percent of respondents believe that cyberbullying is a serious problem. Although students are aware of cyberbullying, only 11% believe that it is a serious issue at their University. At the time of the study, 7% of respondents were currently being cyberbullied. The primary means in which the students were victimized was through the use of social media.

The National Crime Prevention Center indicates that 41% of all teenagers with Internet access have reported being bullied online. Only 10% of the youths that were a victim of cyberbullying conveyed the incident to an adult (National Crime Prevention, 2012). Similar findings from the i-SAFE Foundation revealed that half of adolescents and teens have been bullied online. Over 25% of youth have been repeatedly bullied through their cell phones or the Internet (i-SAFE, 2012). Fewer than 1 in 5 cyberbullying incidents are reported to law enforcement (Webster, 2010).

Kraft and Wang (2009) conducted a study of 713 adolescents that were grouped into four categories based upon their response to whether they have been bullied by someone in the past year or if they were the victim of cyberbullying in the past year. The four categories were (1) neither victim nor offender, (2) pure victim, (3) both offender and victim, and (4) pure offender. The results of the study found that females were more likely to report being both the victim and offender of cyberbullying. Additionally,

boys were more likely to be offenders and less likely to be victims.

Cyberbullying can vary by gender. Based on a 2010 study involving a 2,212 teen males and 2,162 teen females, the male to female ratio varied most among the following three areas: victimization within a person's lifetime (16.6% for males vs. 25.1% for females), admitted to a cyberbullying offense within a person's lifetime (17.5% for males vs. 21.3% for females), and had a hurtful comment posted about oneself online (10.5% for males vs. 18.2% for females), (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010b; Donegan, 2011).

All of these studies have concentrated on the victims of cyberbullying, describing incident rates and reporting mechanisms. None of these studies addressed student perceptions, reactions, and experiences as a whole (including non-victims). In addition, no prior studies were found addressing students' awareness of the legal consequences surrounding cyberbullying. This study addresses these gaps in the literature.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This exploratory study seeks to further examine the perceptions and experiences of college students with cyberbullying. A survey was administered to a convenience sample of 168 college undergraduates at a mid-Atlantic university between January and March of 2013. Students included in the sample were all enrolled in a core university course at the time of the survey. This was done purposefully to capture a cross-section of students from different schools and majors. Prior to administration of the survey, a pilot test was conducted with 42 college undergraduates in November 2012 to test the validity and reliability of the survey questions.

The survey first asked participants to indicate age and gender. The next section of the questionnaire asked participants if they were ever a victim of cyberbullying. If they were, they were also asked whether the incident took place in high school and/or if they were currently being cyberbullied. They were asked to indicate the forms of communication the cyberbully used to contact them, including email, text messaging, social networks, blogs, and chat rooms. In addition, participants were asked if they personally knew the cyberbully, and in what capacity (friend, online acquaintance, from work, from school, or former boyfriend/girlfriend). The participant was asked whether they reported the incident of cyberbullying, and if so, to whom, including: school counselor, parent/guardian, teacher, friend, law enforcement, internet service provider, or cellular service provider. Lastly, if they reported the incident, they were asked to indicate if they did or did not receive help.

The next two questions addressed experiences witnessing cyberbullying. The participant was asked if they know someone that was a victim of cyberbullying. If they have ever been a witness to cyberbullying, participants were asked to indicate their normal response. Responses included: join in, read posts but do not participate, leave the online environment, stand up to the bully, or report the cyberbullying to someone who can help the victim.

Next, participants were asked about their general knowledge and awareness of cyberbullying. They were

asked about whether their high school or university had lectures or programs teaching students about cyberbullying. They were also asked to indicate if they are aware that there are legal consequences associated with cyberbullying.

Lastly, students were asked about their perceptions of cyberbullying by indicating their level of agreement with five statements. This set of questions regarding perception was taken from a study conducted by the Center of Safe and Responsible Internet Use (2010). The statements included the following: (a) Cyberbullying is a normal part of using technology. There is nothing anyone can do to stop it. (b) I know of someone who has been really hurt by cyberbullying. (c) If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell a responsible adult. (d) I would report cyberbullying incidents, if I could do so without anyone knowing it was me. (e) I have the right to say anything that I want online, even if what I say hurts someone or violates someone's privacy. Participants indicated their level of agreement as strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. In addition, participants were asked the open-ended question: What do you think can or should be done to prevent cyberbullying.

Since the study was conducted using a convenience sample at one university, it may not be generalizable in terms of the general public.

4. FINDINGS

Of the 168 undergraduate students surveyed, 62% were male and 38% were female. Ages ranged from 18 to 45, but leaned heavily toward the younger side of the range, with both a mean and median age of 19. The largest groups of respondents were those aged 18-20, making up 82% of the sample. Respondents aged 21-25 made up 15% of the sample, those aged 26-30 made up 2%, and those aged 31-45 made up the remaining 1%. The younger ages of the respondents in this convenience sample can be largely attributed to the fact that the survey was administered to sections of a core university course normally taken by undergrads.

4.1 Student Experiences as Victims of Cyberbullying

RQ1 asked about the experiences and reactions students have had as either victims or witnesses of cyberbullying. Our study indicated that students in the sample had a variety of these experiences. Participants were directly asked whether they had ever been a victim of cyberbullying. Of the 168 students surveyed, 21% indicated that they had been a victim. Of those who had been a victim, the majority, 97%, stated that they had experienced cyberbullying in high school. Only 3% indicated that they were not cyberbullied in high school. There is a statistically significant relationship between being a victim of cyberbullying and having the incident occur during high school, based upon a chi square test ($\chi^2 = 164.968, df = 2, p < .000$). Victims in the sample were more likely to have been cyberbullied in high school than not. However, 9% of respondents stated that they were currently being cyberbullied, clearly indicating that cyberbullying is occurring at the university level. This finding is similar to findings of prior studies which found 11% (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011) and 7% (Molluzzo

& Lawler, 2011) of students still being bullied at the collegiate level.

Gender does appear to be a significant factor in regard to cyberbullying. Of the respondents who indicated being a victim of cyberbullying, 57% were female while 43% were male. A chi-square test indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between being a victim of cyberbullying and gender ($\chi^2 = 7.278, df = 1, p < .007$). Females were more likely to be victims than males. In terms of age, 94% of the victims in the sample were between the ages of 18 and 20, and 6% were between the ages of 21 and 25. None of the older age groups included any victims.

Respondents who indicated that they were a victim of cyberbullying were asked if they personally knew the person who was bullying them. Interestingly, all of the victims indicated that they did, in fact, know the cyberbully personally. The highest number of respondents, 37%, indicated that the cyberbully was a friend and 31% responded that the cyberbully was a former girlfriend or boyfriend. In addition, 29% answered that they knew the cyberbully from school and 3% knew the cyberbully from work. None of the respondents answered that they did not know the identity of the cyberbully, and likewise none answered that the cyberbully was an online acquaintance. This indicates that all of the victims knew the cyberbully personally as more than just an online acquaintance.

More than half of the victims of cyberbullying, 54%, replied that they had reported the cyberbullying incident or told someone about it, while 46% did not. Of those who reported the incident, the largest percentage, 68%, told a friend. Twenty-one percent told a school counselor, 16% told a parent or guardian, 11% reported the incident to their Internet service provider (ISP), 5% reported to their cellular service provider, 5% told a teacher, and 5% reported to law enforcement. These reporting percentages are depicted in Figure 1.

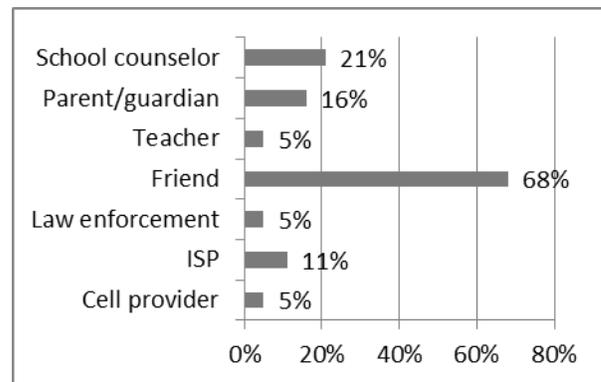


Figure 1. Percentage of student victims of cyberbullying who reported the incident to various people or authorities.

Of those students who reported the cyberbullying incident, only 37% responded that they received help. It's clear from this data that the majority of cyberbullying victims feel the most comfortable reporting incidents to their friends. Our finding of 68% of participants reporting to friends is consistent with a prior study by Burgess-Proctor,

Hinduja, & Patchin (2010) which found that 65% of victims confided in an online buddy or friend. This may explain why such a low percentage of students (37%) who report cyberbullying incidents are actually receiving help. Students are confiding in their friends and not reporting to adults or other authorities.

4.2 Student Experiences as Witnesses of Cyberbullying

To answer the second part of RQ1, which addresses student experiences and reactions as witnesses of cyberbullying, students were directly asked if they know someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying. Over half of the students, 66%, responded that they do know someone who has been cyberbullied. This study reflects similar findings of a study conducted by Li (2005) which investigated the nature and extent of adolescent experiences of cyberbullying. The study revealed that over half of the respondents knew someone that was a victim of cyberbullying.

Students were also asked about their normal response when they have been a witness to cyberbullying. Over half of the students, 64%, answered that they would read posts related to cyberbullying, but do not participate. Twenty-two percent of students answered that they would stand up to the bully, while 21% said that they would report the cyberbullying to someone who could help the victim. A smaller number of students, 18%, answered that they would simply leave the online environment (taking no action). Two percent of students admitted that they would join in on the cyberbullying. These responses are depicted in Figure 2.

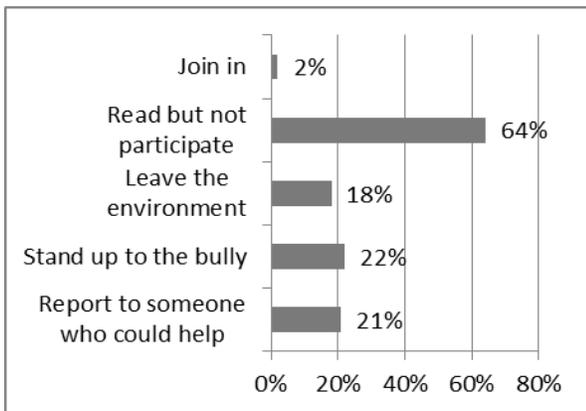


Figure 2. Percentage of student responses to the witnessing of cyberbullying.

4.3 Student Perceptions about Cyberbullying

RQ2 asked about college students’ perceptions of cyberbullying. To address this research question, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five statements related to cyberbullying. The statements included the following: (a) Cyberbullying is a normal part of using technology. There is nothing anyone can do to stop it. (b) I know of someone who has been really hurt by cyberbullying. (c) If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell a responsible adult. (d) I would report cyberbullying incidents if I could do so without anyone knowing it was me. (e) I have the right to say anything that I want online, even if what I say hurts someone or violates someone’s privacy.

Figure 3 shows the percentages of agreement with statement a: Cyberbullying is a normal part of using technology. There is nothing anyone can do to stop it. The highest response to this statement was “Agree,” perhaps indicating that students feel as though nothing can be done about cyberbullying because it is a natural consequence of using technology. However, the majority of students when combining both disagree and strongly disagree, 51%, expressed disagreement with this statement.

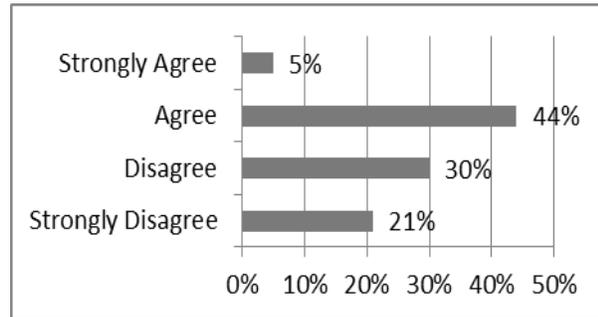


Figure 3. Percentages of student agreement with the statement, “Cyberbullying is a normal part of using technology. There is nothing anyone can do about it.”

Statement b was: I know of someone who has been really hurt by cyberbullying. Figure 4 shows the percentages of agreement with this statement. More than half of the respondents, when combining strongly agree and agree, 52%, expressed agreement with this statement, perhaps indicating that they may sympathize with victims of cyberbullying due to personal exposure. Slightly less than half of those that disagree and strongly disagree, 48%, expressed disagreement with the statement.

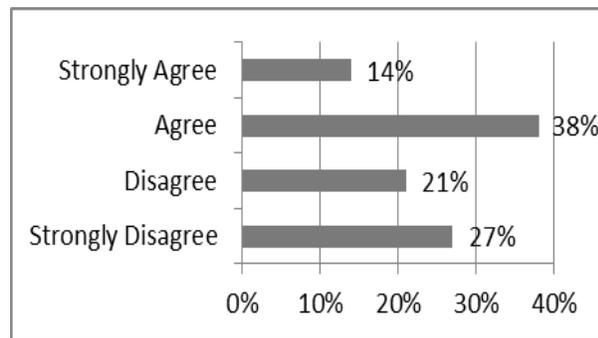


Figure 4. Percentages of student agreement with the statement, “I know someone who has been really hurt by cyberbullying.”

Figure 5 shows the percentages of agreement with statement c: If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell a responsible adult. The majority of the respondents when combining strongly agree with agree, 88%, indicated that they agreed with this statement. This shows that most students are aware that they should report cyberbullying incidents rather than standing by and doing nothing.

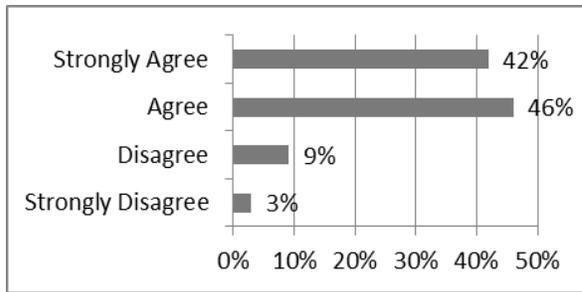


Figure 5. Percentages of student agreement with the statement, “If someone is being hurt by cyberbullying, it is important to tell a responsible adult.”

The fourth statement, statement d, was: I would report cyberbullying incidents if I could do so without anyone knowing it was me. Figure 6 shows the percentages of agreement with this statement. The majority of respondents when combining strongly agree with agree, 77%, indicated agreement with this statement. This shows that while most students agreed with statement c, that cyberbullying incidents should be reported, many would be more likely to actually carry out the action of reporting an incident if they could do so anonymously. Perhaps the fear of retribution for getting involved would stop some of these students from reporting incidents.

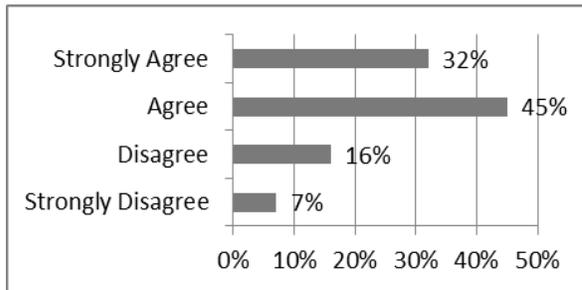


Figure 6. Percentages of student agreement with the statement, “I would report cyberbullying incidents if I could do so without anyone knowing it was me.”

Figure 7 shows the percentages of agreement with statement e: I have the right to say anything that I want online, even if what I say hurts someone or violates someone’s privacy. The majority of students disagree and strongly disagree, 73%, indicated disagreement with this statement. However, 21% agreed with the statement and 6% indicated strong agreement. This may indicate that some students feel that it is their right to say whatever they like on the Internet, perhaps unaware of legal consequences for cyberbullying (or in disagreement with them).

4.4 Prevention of Cyberbullying

Students were also asked the open-ended question, “What do you think can or should be done to prevent cyberbullying?” Over half of the students, 60%, did write in a variety of interesting responses to this question. One of the main areas of response surrounded the concept of training and

awareness. Twenty students answered that there needs to be more training and public awareness on the effects of cyberbullying, and five responded that kids must be taught about cyberbullying at an early age. In addition, several students noted that parents need to be more watchful and aware of what their children are doing online and on their cell phones. One student suggested posting victim reviews in order to give a more personal feel to awareness campaigns.

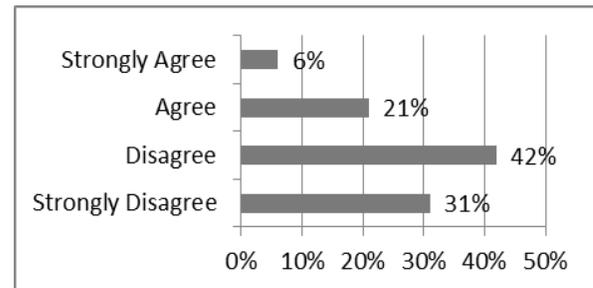


Figure 7. Percentages of student agreement with the statement, “I have the right to say anything that I want online, even if what I say hurts someone or violates someone’s privacy.”

Other students stated that there need to be more severe consequences for cyberbullying, including the creation of additional laws. In terms of enforcement of consequences, one student noted that there need to be more security measures to block offensive/harassing content, and others suggested setting up online “traps” to catch a bully during an investigation or setting up a group of people to monitor online activity within schools.

A number of students also discussed the importance of reporting cyberbullying incidents. One suggested that there should be easier ways to report incidents, and another noted that there should be anonymous reporting methods such as a tip line. Others noted that students should be taught how to report an incident, rather than just to report it, noting that many students are unaware of whom they should contact. One student pointed out the importance of not being a passive watcher, stating, “People need to report what they see instead of being a useless witness.”

Thirteen students responded that there is nothing that can be done, and eight stated that they have no idea what can be done to solve the problem.

Students were also asked if they were aware that there are legal consequences associated with cyberbullying. The majority of respondents, 83%, indicated that they are aware of legal consequences, while 17% said they were not.

In addition, students were asked if their high school and university had lectures or programs in place to teach students about cyberbullying. The majority, 72%, responded that their high school did have such programs in place, while only 25% answered that their university had programs. This finding supports the literature by indicating that cyberbullying prevention programs are typically targeted to the high school level student rather than the university student, regardless of growing evidence that cyberbullying is

also occurring at the college level. (National Crime Prevention Council, 2007).

5. CONCLUSIONS

We need to look at the problem of cyberbullying more holistically. What can bystanders do to help with the problem? How can friends help their friends who are being bullied? How can other adults and law enforcement get involved in a useful way to aid prevention?

To date, previous studies of cyberbullying have focused on the victims. While it is important to understand the number of incidents of cyberbullying and the demographics related to those incidents, perhaps we need to take a step back. It is also important to understand this problem in a larger context. This study has attempted to fill some of the gaps in the current research surrounding cyberbullying. It focused not only on the perceptions and actions of the victim, but also on the perceptions and actions of witnesses to cyberbullying in the hopes of better understanding all of the factors at play when cyberbullying occurs.

As indicated by the responses almost 50% of the students believe that cyberbullying has become a normal part of life. More than half of the students, 66%, have witnessed cyberbullying during their lifetime. Further, our results show that victims of cyberbullying tend to confide in their friends more often (68%) than they confide in a responsible adult (42%). This places friends, who are often bystanders to cyberbullying incidents, in an important position.

It is apparent from the findings that students know to do the right thing if they are a witness to a person that is a victim of cyberbullying, but do not always follow through properly. Sixty four percent of students that witnessed cyberbullying online read the posts but did not participate, and 88% believe that it is important to tell a responsible adult if they witness cyberbullying. This should be an encouraging sign but only 21% of students would actually follow through and report the incident. The majority of those students, 77%, would report the incident if they could remain anonymous.

Providing education and awareness programs is the key to dealing with cyberbullying. Approximately 72% of students were exposed to cyberbullying programs at the high school level while only 25% have witnessed programs at the collegiate level. Strategies that should be examined at the college level include cyberbullying campaigns, providing a clear set of rules and consequences, and having an anonymous system in place for students to report incidents of cyberbullying.

Organizations such as End to Cyberbullying (ETCB) and Stop Cyberbullying have been formed to raise public awareness. Organizations alone are not enough. As we continue to learn more about cyberbullying it is apparent that programs at the collegiate level need to be implemented to help decrease the extent of the problem.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Karen Paullet has been a faculty member at Robert Morris



University since 2007 where she teaches Cyber Security. She holds a BS in Information Systems, a MS in Communications and Information Systems, and a D.Sc. in Information Systems and Communications from Robert Morris University. In addition Dr. Paullet has spent over 13 years working with law enforcement preparing cases using digital evidence for trial. She has spoken at over 100 engagements throughout the country on the Dangers of Social Network Sites, Internet Safety for Children, Cyberbullying, Cyberstalking and the CSI Effect. She has applied her research interests to educate students, organizations and law enforcement. Her work has been published in various journals including the Information Systems Educators Journal (ISEDJ), the Journal of Information Systems Applied Research (JISAR), Issues in Information Systems (IIS) and The Institute for Operations Research and Management Sciences (SEInforms). She brings her professional experience in law enforcement and teaching to serve and educate others in the community.

Jamie Pinchot is an Associate Professor of Computer and



Information Systems at Robert Morris University. Dr. Pinchot holds a BA in Computer Science and an AA in Management Information Systems from Thiel College. She also holds a MS in Communications and Information Systems and a D.Sc. in Information Systems and Communications from Robert Morris University. Her research interests and work are in the areas of mobile technologies, Internet security and privacy, web and mobile app development and usability, social media, wikis and other online collaboration tools. Dr. Pinchot spent more than nine years working in IT in various capacities including web development, web interface design, web integration with legacy systems and most recently as a Senior IT Consultant specializing in enterprise online collaboration tools, social media, and mobile technologies. She has published papers in journals such as the Journal of Information Systems Applied Research (JISAR) and Issues in Information Systems (IIS).



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