

Cyberbullying more common for adults than children during pandemic, say experts



Justice Minister David Lametti announced the members of an expert advisory group on online safety on March 30 as the next step for the federal government in developing legislation to address harmful online content. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Adults who work in fields related to COVID-19 have been at greater risk of being targeted with online forms of harassment during the pandemic, including scientists, health-care practitioners, and educators.

BY JESSE CNOCKAERT

Cyberbullying among children may have decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, but adults in the workplace may be at greater risk, according to experts.

"I suspect the vitriol is greater than it's ever been, because collectively, the world is engaged in a pandemic that has led to polarized viewpoints," said Tracy Vaillancourt, a counselling psychology professor at the University of Ottawa and a Canada Research

Chair in school-based mental health and violence prevention. "I think that in adults, cyberbullying will be higher, but I don't think that necessarily it's going to be higher in children and youth."

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in waves of lockdowns around the world, with many children at times staying away from school buildings in favour of at-home learning, and many adults shifting from working in an office building to working from their homes.

Adults who work in fields related to COVID-19 have been at greater risk of being targeted with online forms of harassment during the pandemic, including scientists, health-care practitioners, and educators, according to Vaillancourt. During the pandemic, Vaillancourt has received threatening messages sent to her online, and she's also been targeted by doxing, which is when private or identifying information about an individual, such as a home address, is published online with malicious intent.

"The pandemic has unified the world. Everybody has had this experience, and everybody has an opinion about this experience, and it tends to be a polarized opinion," she said. "If you talk to climate scientists, they'll say that this has been a steady state for

the past 10 to 15 years. But again, anybody who does anything to do with COVID-19 is attacked viciously online regularly."

In contrast, children have experienced lower rates of cyberbullying during the pandemic, despite the greater amount of time spent online. About 59.8 per cent of students in Grades 4 to 12 reported being bullied prior to the pandemic compared to 39.5 per cent who reported being

bullied during the pandemic, according to a study released on July 7, 2021, by Vaillancourt and five other researchers, including Debra Pepler, a research professor of psychology at York University in Toronto, and Heather Brittain, a research co-ordinator at the University of Ottawa. The rates of physical, verbal, social, and cyberbullying victimization and perpetration were all higher prior to the pandemic than

during the pandemic, according to the study.

The decreased rates of cyberbullying among children could be because, for children, bullying online is often an extension of bullying conducted in person, according to Vaillancourt.

"Cyberbullying doesn't occupy a lot of the bullying for kids and youth. We might think it does, but the bulk of bullying happens face to face. Cyberbullying tends to be a spillover effect of what happens face to face. If you reduce face-to-face bullying, then there's not that much of a spillover to go online," she said.

Andrew Shaw, a partner at law firm Baker McKenzie in Toronto, said that he's seen an overall increase in harassment claims during the pandemic because of the increased number of people working from home.

"Generalized harassment complaints have actually gone up," said Shaw. "I think people just aren't used to having a supervisor online. I also think it probably is related to stress that people have in general because of the pandemic, because of maybe job insecurity, [and] the fact that they're working from home and they're not in the most ideal scenario."



Tracy Vaillancourt, a Canada Research Chair in school-based mental health and violence prevention, says 'everybody has an opinion' about COVID-19, and that leads to polarization. *Photograph courtesy of Tracy Vaillancourt*

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Workplace harassment complaints increasing during the pandemic may be partly attributed to the stress of supervisors attempting to manage their teams over the internet, according to Shaw.

“[Supervisors] would perhaps give a negative performance appraisal, and something that might go over more productively in person [instead] went over like a lead balloon over Zoom. Then maybe there’d be an argument that would ensue. Then all of a sudden, I would get the HR folks or the in-house counsel emailing me saying, ‘Oh, we have a harassment complaint from an employee against their supervisor,’” he said.

The No. 1 priority for governments seeking to enact legislation to contend with cyberbullying is to identify what cyberbullying is, according to Shaw.

Nova Scotia is the only jurisdiction in Canada that has a legislated definition of cyberbullying. Under the province’s Intimate Images and Cyber-Protection Act, 2017, cyberbullying is defined as a direct or indirect electronic communication that causes, or is likely to cause, harm to another individual’s health or well-being, and where the person responsible for the communication had malicious intent.

Public Safety Canada defines cyberbullying as using computers, smartphones, or other connected devices to embarrass, hurt, mock, threaten, or be mean to someone online.

“In my practice, I deal with this quite often. But interestingly, very rarely do people use the word cyberbullying. It’s usually couched in terms of harassment, or sometimes discrimination. I think that’s because there isn’t a lot of legislation out there to deal with this issue,” said Shaw.

Provinces also address cyberbullying under their respective Education Acts, according to Shaw. For example, the Ontario Education Act defines cyberbullying as “bullying by electronic means.” Shaw noted that the act only applies to the public education system.

“Outside of the realm of education, for example, in most

cases you’re having to deal with [cyberbullying] under occupational health and safety legislation, or under human rights legislation. That’s why the verbiage tends to shy away from cyberbullying. But when I look at it, I kind of take an expansive view and say it’s any sort of harassment or intimidation, or discrimination, or anything that rises to a significant enough level of offensive conduct that occurs over the internet,” said Shaw.

To address harmful content online, the federal Liberal government conducted a public consultation between July 29 and Sept. 25, 2021, for a new legislative and regulatory framework intended “to make social media platforms and other online services more accountable and transparent.” The proposed framework would target five categories of online harm: hate speech, terrorist content, content that incites violence, child sexual exploitation content, and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

On Feb. 3, the government released a report summarizing the public input from the consultation. Most public feedback argued that the proposed five categories of online harm were too diverse to be adequately addressed by the same regime, according to the report. Some argued that a “one-size-fits-all” approach would be unlikely to address the nuances of each type of content, and suggested that each requires a more specialized approach.

Some respondents also criticized the consultation process, arguing that the consultation happened at an inopportune time during a federal election period and a pandemic, or that the consultation time was too short. Concerns were also raised during the consultation process related to freedom of expression and privacy rights.

Justice Minister David Lametti (LaSalle-Émard-Verdun, Que.) and Minister of Canadian Heritage Pablo Rodriguez (Honore-Mercier, Que.) announced the members of an expert advisory group on online safety on March 30 as the next step in developing the legislation to address harmful online content. Members of the advisory group include Bernie



Shaheen Shariff, an associate professor at McGill University, says ‘as social media use increased, so did the spread of hate.’ Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn

Farber, chair of the Canada Anti-Hate Network, and Emily Laidlaw, an associate professor in the faculty of law at the University of Calgary.

The expert advisory group will hold a series of nine workshops to discuss the components of the proposed legislative and regulatory framework to address online safety, according to a press release.

“Too many people and communities are victimized by harmful online content that is often amplified and spread through social media platforms and other online services. The Government of Canada believes that Canadians should have protection from harmful online content, while respecting freedom of expression. The creation of the expert advisory group on online safety shows our commitment to taking meaningful action to make our online environment safer and more inclusive for all Canadians,” said Lametti in the press release.

The Hill Times reached out to Lametti to ask about how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted incidents of cyberbullying and the government’s response, but did not receive a response by deadline.

Wayne MacKay, professor emeritus at Dalhousie University’s Schulich School of Law in Nova Scotia, said the most important factor in developing legislation related to stopping online harm is ensuring it does not negatively affect freedom of expression. As an example, he referenced the former Cyber-Safety Act in his province, which was struck down in 2015 for going “too far” in limiting freedom of speech, according to MacKay.

The Cyber-Safety Act, the first law passed in Canada aimed at protecting victims of online harassment, passed in 2013 in response to the death of Rehtaeh Parsons, a 17-year-old who was taken off life-support on April 7, 2013, after attempting suicide. Parsons’ family alleged she was sexually assaulted in November 2011 when she was 15, and bullied for months after a digital

photo of the incident was shared around her school.

Supreme Court Justice Glen McDougall ruled in 2015 that the anti-cyberbullying law was a “colossal failure” that infringed on Charter rights.

“That is usually the major challenge, because even though the cause is a good and important one, when you’re defining the limits on free speech, such as in relation to hate speech, or sexist speech ... you have to be able to establish that they are reasonable limits on the general guarantee of free speech,” said MacKay.

MacKay previously served as chair for a task force in Nova Scotia on cyberbullying in 2012. He said that the internet can be a “very powerful force to bully people and to damage people.” “With COVID, and people being more frequently in front of the screens, it has, I think, greatly increased the extent of cyberbullying, and greatly increased the harms that come with that. By spending a lot of time, as young people in particular do, on the net, they are also exploring new areas and if they’re not very careful, they’re going to be victimized by trolls and others,” said MacKay.

Shaheen Shariff, an associate professor at McGill University with a focus on human rights and constitutional issues, told *The Hill Times* that online distribution of non-consensual intimate images has increased during the pandemic. She said she prefers the term “technology-facilitated violence” (TFV) over cyberbullying.

“People don’t like using cyberbullying anymore because it has been mainly linked to children over the last two decades and technology-facilitated violence includes adults who engage in similar behaviours,” she said. “As social media use increased, so did the spread of hate, TFV, cyberbullying, and non-consensual distribution of intimate images. As such, people have become much more aware, especially with increases in polarized hate, misogyny, homophobia, as well as politically driven fake news.”

Shariff has researched TFV since 2004. She said an issue when it comes to TFV has been determining where responsibility lies when it occurs.

“Schools would always say, ‘It’s not our responsibility. It’s the parents’ responsibility,’ and parents would blame the schools for failing to protect their children who were victimized. There was a lot of passing the buck,” she said. “In the two decades since then, there has been an enormous amount of scholarship that emerged relating to cyberbullying and numerous anti-bullying programs. Provincial legislation was developed in some provinces and people are really much more aware of it.”

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Canada cyberbullying statistics

- In 2014, about 17 per cent of the population aged 15 to 29 (representing about 1.1 million people) that accessed the internet at some point between 2009 and 2014 reported they had experienced cyberbullying or cyberstalking.
 - Of those who experienced cyberbullying or cyberstalking, 36 per cent reported they had experienced cyberbullying, but not cyberstalking. Thirty-three per cent reported they experienced cyberstalking but not cyberbullying, and 31 per cent reported experiencing both.
 - Sociodemographic factors associated with cyberbullying and cyberstalking are not necessarily the same. Cyberbullying was more prevalent in younger age groups and within the homosexual/bisexual population, while cyberstalking was more prevalent among the single, never married population and among women.
 - Young Canadians with a past experience of victimization were significantly more likely to experience cyberbullying and cyberstalking. For instance, 31 per cent of those who were physically or sexually assaulted before the age of 15 experienced either cyberstalking or cyberbullying, compared with 13 per cent of those who did not report an experience of assault.
 - Cyberbullying is associated with the presence of an emotional, psychological or mental health condition, mistrust of people and marijuana use, while cyberstalking is associated with taking measures to protect oneself from crime.
- Source: Cyberbullying and cyberstalking among Internet users aged 15 to 29 in Canada. *Statistics Canada*, released Dec. 19, 2016

Cyberbullying and youth suicide

- Cyberbullying increases suicide attempts by 8.7 percentage points.
 - Cyberbullying increases suicidal thoughts by 15 percentage points.
 - A one per cent drop in cyberbullying decreases fatal suicide rates by 11 per every 100,000 individuals.
 - Cyberbullying laws lead to a seven per cent decrease in cyberbullying victimization.
- Source: Does cyberbullying impact youth suicidal behaviors?, *Journal of Health Economics*, December 2017



Wayne MacKay, professor emeritus at Dalhousie University, says the major challenge in developing cyberbullying legislation is to avoid negative impacts on freedom of speech. Photograph courtesy of LinkedIn