

The Pervasive Landscape of Cyberbullying Among U.S. Children: Statistics, Impacts, and Intersections with Online Exploitation

1. Introduction: Defining Cyberbullying and its Digital Landscape

This report examines the multifaceted phenomenon of cyberbullying among U.S. youth, distinguishing it from traditional forms of bullying and detailing the digital environments where it predominantly occurs. Understanding the nature of cyberbullying is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies in an increasingly digital world.

1.1. Defining Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is characterized as unwanted, repeated, aggressive, and negative behavior perpetrated through digital devices such as cell phones, tablets, and computers.¹ This includes communications via email, texting, social media, gaming platforms, instant messaging, and photo sharing applications.¹ The core elements defining cyberbullying are its willful and intentional nature, its repetitive pattern, and the perceived harm inflicted upon the target through electronic means.¹

A key distinction between cyberbullying and traditional bullying lies in the unique characteristics imparted by the digital medium. Cyberbullying is notably persistent, capable of occurring at any time—morning, afternoon, or evening—due to students' continuous access to technology, extending beyond school hours into their homes and communities.¹ This pervasive nature means that unlike physical bullying, which might cease once a child leaves a specific location, cyberbullying can follow a victim everywhere, leading to a profound sense of inescapable distress. This amplification of harm is a direct consequence of the digital environment, fundamentally altering the experience of victimization.

Furthermore, cyberbullying often proves harder for adults to detect compared to overt physical bullying, as it takes place on personal devices like phones and computers.¹ The

anonymity afforded by online platforms can embolden perpetrators, making it difficult for targets to identify their tormentors and for bullies to be held accountable.¹ The digital realm also allows harmful information to spread quickly and widely, making it challenging to contain or remove negative content once it has been posted.¹ This widespread dissemination means that images or messages can remain online indefinitely, causing prolonged psychological suffering and re-victimization, as the digital footprint of the abuse persists.¹ The physical distance provided by technology can also make it easier for bullies to inflict harm without witnessing the immediate emotional response of their target, potentially leading them to underestimate the severity of their actions.¹

In a broader legal context, cyberbullying falls under the umbrella of online harassment, which also encompasses cyberstalking and cyberharassment.³ While cyberstalking typically involves a credible threat of harm, cyberharassment and cyberbullying may primarily cause embarrassment, annoyance, or humiliation.⁴ Federal law, specifically 18 U.S.C. § 2261A, addresses cyberstalking that causes substantial emotional distress or places a person in reasonable fear of death.⁴ Most statutes governing these offenses apply to both adult and minor victims.⁴

1.2. Digital Environments for Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is prevalent across a diverse array of digital platforms and technologies that are commonly used by youth. Social media networks, text messages, and messaging applications such as WhatsApp are frequently exploited channels for these behaviors.⁵ Email, as well as text, voice, and video chats within online forums, games, and other applications, also serve as mediums for cyberbullying.⁵

Notably, "minor-friendly applications such as social media platforms or gaming sites" are explicitly identified as common grounds for recruitment by online threat groups like "The Com".⁷ This observation indicates that these platforms are not merely arenas for peer-to-peer cyberbullying but also serve as entry points for more severe forms of child exploitation. This dual-use characteristic of digital platforms, where they offer legitimate avenues for connection and entertainment while simultaneously being exploited for harmful activities, presents a complex challenge.⁷ Simply restricting access to these platforms is not a holistic solution, as it would deny children the substantial benefits of online interaction, including social connection and learning opportunities. This reality underscores that effective prevention must prioritize building digital resilience, fostering critical thinking skills, and promoting safe online behaviors among youth, alongside the implementation of robust safety features and moderation by platform providers. It also implies a continuous need for parents and educators to stay informed about the specific platforms children are using and their associated risks, as the digital landscape is constantly evolving.

2. Prevalence and Trends of Cyberbullying Among U.S.

Youth

This section presents current statistics on cyberbullying victimization and offending rates, analyzing trends over time and demographic variations among U.S. youth.

2.1. Overall Victimization and Offending Rates

Data from various reputable sources provides a comprehensive picture of cyberbullying prevalence:

- **Lifetime Victimization:** Approximately 30% of teens surveyed by the Cyberbullying Research Center (CRC) over the last twelve studies reported experiencing cyberbullying at some point in their lifetimes.⁸ Another source indicates that about 37% of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 have been bullied online.⁹ The CRC's 2019 data, based on a nationally representative sample of middle and high school students, similarly found a 37% lifetime victimization rate.¹
- **Recent Victimization:** Around 13% of teens reported being cyberbullied in the 30 days preceding the CRC survey.⁸ The School Crime Supplement (SCS) reported that in 2021-22, 22% of students aged 12-18 who experienced bullying, reported it occurred online or by text.¹⁰ This figure increased to 21.6% among the 19.2% of students who were bullied in 2022.⁸ The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) indicated that an estimated 15.7% of high school students were electronically bullied in the 12 months prior to their 2019 survey.¹
- **Lifetime Offending:** Approximately 15% of teens surveyed by the CRC admitted to cyberbullying others at some point in their lifetimes.¹
- **Recent Offending:** About 6% of teens reported cyberbullying others in the most recent 30 days.⁸ Among those who cyberbullied, posting mean comments online was the most common type reported (9.3%) in a 2019 sample.¹
- **Tween Statistics (9-12 year-olds, 2020):** A 2020 survey found that approximately 15% of tweens had been cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes, and about 3% had cyberbullied others.⁸ Overall, one in five (20.9%) tweens experienced, perpetrated, or witnessed cyberbullying.¹

2.2. Trends Over Time

While direct comparisons across studies are challenging due to varying definitions and methodologies, available data suggests a persistent or increasing trend in cyberbullying. The Youth Internet Safety Survey observed a slight increase in cyberbullying behaviors from 6% in 2000 to 11% in 2010.⁸ The YRBSS reported 16.2% in 2011, 15.9% in 2021, and 16% in 2023.⁸ The

SCS noted an increase from 15.8% in 2019 to 21.6% in 2022 among bullied students.⁸ The CRC's own research indicates a steady increase over time, despite methodological differences that complicate direct comparisons.⁸

A notable observation from recent years is the impact of the pandemic: in-school bullying dramatically decreased, while cyberbullying saw an increase, a trend that has not yet reversed.¹¹ This suggests a fundamental shift in how bullying manifests, moving from physical spaces to digital ones. This is not merely a temporary change but potentially a long-term adaptation by perpetrators to the pervasive digital environment. This implies that prevention efforts must heavily prioritize online safety and digital citizenship, as traditional anti-bullying programs alone may no longer be sufficient. Schools and parents must recognize that the "safe haven" of home is no longer guaranteed from bullying, requiring constant vigilance and open communication about online interactions.

The following tables provide a consolidated view of cyberbullying victimization rates and trends across key U.S. surveys.

Table 1: Cyberbullying Victimization Rates Among U.S. Youth (Overall and by Age/Gender)

Source (Year)	Age Group	Gender	Lifetime Victimization	Recent Victimization (Past 30 Days/12 Months)
CRC (Overall)	Teens	All	~30%	~13% (Past 30 days)
Exploding Topics (Recent)	13-17	Female	59.2%	28.6% (Past month)
Exploding Topics (Recent)	13-17	Male	49.5%	24.2% (Past month)
DoSomething.org	12-17	All	~37%	30% (More than once)
Pew Research (2022)	13-17	All	46%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	15-17	All	49%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	13-14	All	42%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	15-17	Female	54%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	15-17	Male	44%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	13-14	Female	41%	N/A
Pew Research (2022)	13-14	Male	41%	N/A

CRC (2020)	9-12	All	~15%	N/A
SCS (2021-22)	12-18	All	N/A	22% (Among bullied students)
SCS (2022)	12-18	All	N/A	21.6% (Among bullied students)
YRBSS (2019)	High School	All	N/A	15.7% (Past 12 months)

Note: "N/A" indicates data not explicitly available in the provided snippets for that specific category. Some percentages refer to "bullied online or by text" as a subset of overall bullying.

Table 2: Trends in Electronic Bullying/Cyberbullying (2015-2025) from Key U.S. Surveys

Survey Source	Year	Electronic Bullying/Cyberbullying Victimization Rate	Notes
YRBSS (CDC)	2011	16.2%	Students reported electronic bullying
YRBSS (CDC)	2019	15.7%	High school students electronically bullied in past 12 months
YRBSS (CDC)	2021	15.9%	Students reported electronic bullying
YRBSS (CDC)	2023	16%	Students reported being bullied electronically
SCS (NCES)	2019	15.8%	Of bullied students, reported being bullied "online or by text"
SCS (NCES)	2021-22	22%	Of bullied students, reported bullying happened "online or by text"
SCS (NCES)	2022	21.6%	Of bullied students, reported bullying happened "online or by text"
Cyberbullying Research Center	2000	6%	Youth Internet Safety Survey, slight increase observed
Cyberbullying Research Center	2005	9%	Youth Internet Safety Survey, slight increase observed

Cyberbullying Research Center	2010	11%	Youth Internet Safety Survey, slight increase observed
Cyberbullying Research Center	2007-2019	18% to 37%	Lifetime victimization percentages more than doubled

Note: Different surveys employ varying definitions and methodologies, which can affect direct comparability of rates across sources and timeframes. The table reflects the most recent available data from each cited source.

2.3. Demographic Variations

Cyberbullying does not affect all youth equally; certain demographic groups experience disproportionately higher rates and more severe impacts.

- Gender:** Adolescent girls are as likely as, or more likely than, boys to experience cyberbullying.⁸ Specifically, 28.6% of U.S. females aged 13-17 reported being cyberbullied in the past month, compared to 24.2% of males in the same age group.¹¹ Lifetime victimization rates are higher for girls (59.2%) than for boys (49.5%).¹¹ However, some data indicates that boys (16.1% lifetime, 8.1% in the most recent 30 days) are more likely to admit to cyberbullying others than girls (13.4% lifetime, 4.6% in the most recent 30 days).¹ Older teen girls aged 15-17 are particularly susceptible, with 54% reporting having faced at least one cyberbullying behavior and 38% experiencing multiple types of online harassment, compared to younger teen girls and boys of any age.¹² Girls are more likely to report having rumors spread about them online, whereas boys are more likely to report online threats.¹
- Age:** Cyberbullying is especially prevalent among teenagers.¹¹ Older teens (15-17 year olds) are more likely to have experienced at least one cyberbullying behavior (49%) compared to younger teens (13-14 year olds) (42%).¹² Reports of cyberbullying are highest among middle school students, followed by high school, and then primary school students.¹
- Other Demographics:**
 - LGBTQ+ Students:** More than half (52%) of LGBTQ+ students reported experiencing physical or online bullying, and alarmingly, attempted suicides were three times higher among this group.⁹
 - Race/Ethnicity:** Black middle-school-aged cyberbullying victims are almost 135% more likely to consider and plan suicide than non-victims.¹¹ Seven out of ten Black teens and 62% of Hispanic teens view online harassment and bullying as a major problem for people their age, in contrast to 46% of White teens.¹²
 - Socioeconomic Status:** Teens from households earning under \$75,000 annually

are more inclined to identify cyberbullying as a major problem (62%) compared to teens from more affluent homes (47%).¹²

- **Online Usage:** Teens who report being online almost constantly are more likely to have been harassed online (53%) and to have faced multiple forms of abuse (37%).¹²

The consistent finding that certain demographic groups—particularly older adolescent girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and minority groups—experience higher rates of cyberbullying and more severe impacts points to existing societal vulnerabilities and biases being replicated and amplified in online spaces. For instance, girls are more frequently targeted based on physical appearance or gender ¹², and Black youth exhibit a significantly elevated risk of suicidal ideation.¹¹ This underscores that cyberbullying is not merely an individual problem but a societal one, reflecting and exacerbating existing inequalities and prejudices. This observation highlights the critical need for targeted, culturally sensitive prevention programs that address specific vulnerabilities and intersectional identities, ensuring that interventions are tailored to the unique challenges faced by these groups.

3. Forms and Platforms of Cyberbullying

This section details the various behaviors that constitute cyberbullying and the digital environments where these acts are most frequently observed.

3.1. Common Cyberbullying Behaviors

Cyberbullying manifests through a diverse range of behaviors, extending from subtle social manipulation to overt threats and sexual harassment. The most common forms include posting mean or hurtful things about someone online, reported by 77.5% of students, and spreading rumors, reported by 70.4%.¹ Causing embarrassment or humiliation is also highly prevalent, affecting 69.1% of victims.¹

Beyond these, cyberbullying tactics encompass:

- **Exclusion:** Intentional exclusion from a group chat was reported in 66.4% of cases.¹¹
- **Repeated Contact:** Persistent contact via text or online after being asked to stop occurred in 55.5% of cases.¹¹
- **Threats:** This includes threatening to hurt someone or telling them to commit suicide.¹ Notably, boys are more likely to report online threats than girls.¹
- **Impersonation:** Perpetrators may impersonate someone online to solicit or post personal or false information.¹
- **Doxing:** This involves publicly revealing personal information, such as addresses, social security numbers, credit card numbers, phone numbers, or social media links, with the intent to threaten and destroy privacy.¹

- **Unwanted Explicit Content:** A concerning behavior is the sending of explicit images that were not requested, reported by 17% of teens in 2022.¹² Girls and young women aged 13–21 are particularly vulnerable, with 73% reporting receiving unwanted sexual photos.¹¹

The varied behaviors listed, ranging from mean comments and rumors to exclusion, threats, doxing, and unwanted explicit content, demonstrate that cyberbullying is not a monolithic act but rather a spectrum of digital aggression.¹ This spectrum extends from social manipulation to direct threats and sexual harassment. The inclusion of "unwanted explicit content" highlights the blurring lines between general cyberbullying and more severe forms of online sexual exploitation, such as sextortion. This comprehensive understanding of the diverse behaviors is crucial for developing targeted interventions. For instance, strategies to combat rumor-spreading might differ significantly from those addressing explicit threats or doxing. It also emphasizes the need for online platforms to develop nuanced content moderation policies that can effectively address this full spectrum of harmful digital interactions.

Table 3: Common Types of Cyberbullying Behaviors Reported by U.S. Teens

Cyberbullying Behavior	Reported Prevalence (Percentage)	Source (Year)
Posting mean/hurtful things online	77.5%	Exploding Topics ¹¹
Spreading rumors online	70.4%	Exploding Topics ¹¹
Embarrassment or humiliation	69.1%	Exploding Topics ¹¹
Intentional exclusion from group chat	66.4%	Exploding Topics ¹¹
Repeated contact after asked to stop	55.5%	Exploding Topics ¹¹
Called an offensive name online/cellphone	32%	Pew Research ¹²
False rumors spread about them online	22%	Pew Research ¹²
Sent explicit images they didn't ask for	17%	Pew Research ¹²
Physically threatened online	10%	Pew Research ¹²
Explicit images shared without consent	7%	Pew Research ¹²

Note: Data points may derive from different surveys and timeframes, reflecting varying methodologies and focus. Some percentages represent prevalence among students who reported experiencing cyberbullying.

3.2. Prevalent Online Platforms and Technologies

Cyberbullying occurs across virtually any digital environment where children and adolescents interact.

- **Social Media Platforms:** Social media is identified as a primary medium for cyberbullying.² Specific platforms mentioned include Facebook, Tumblr², YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram¹³, and X (formerly Twitter).¹
- **Gaming Sites:** Online gaming platforms are significant avenues for both cyberbullying and more severe forms of exploitation, as they allow predators to befriend and manipulate children.⁷ Consoles like Xbox and platforms such as Twitch or Discord are specifically noted as environments where these interactions occur.¹⁴
- **Messaging Apps:** Text messages and messaging applications like WhatsApp are commonly utilized for cyberbullying.⁵
- **Other Digital Devices:** The nature of cyberbullying means it can occur on any device with internet capability, including personal computers, tablets, and mobile phones.¹⁴

The consistent mention of "minor-friendly applications" like social media and gaming sites as prevalent platforms for both cyberbullying and more severe exploitation suggests a phenomenon where perpetrators "follow" children to the digital spaces they inhabit.⁷ This implies that the landscape of online risk is dynamic and continuously evolving; as children migrate to new platforms, so do the associated dangers. This means that prevention and safety efforts cannot remain static; they must continuously adapt to new technologies and platforms that gain popularity among youth. This also places a significant responsibility on technology companies to integrate safety features and robust moderation into their core product design, rather than treating them as an afterthought, to proactively protect their youngest users.

4. Impacts of Cyberbullying on Youth Mental Health and Well-being

Cyberbullying inflicts profound psychological, emotional, academic, and social consequences on children and adolescents, often leading to long-lasting harm.

4.1. Psychological and Emotional Effects

The emotional and psychological toll of cyberbullying is significant and can manifest in various ways:

- **Anxiety:** Victims are more likely to develop anxiety, which can include social anxiety disorder (SAD), generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹⁵ The feeling of inescapable online harassment can lead to chronic stress, as children may feel there is no safe space from their tormentors.¹⁵

- **Depression:** Cyberbullying victims face a higher risk of experiencing depressive symptoms.¹⁵ One study found that approximately 33% of females and 16.6% of males had depressive symptoms after being harassed online.¹⁵ Adolescents who experienced cyberbullying were more than twice as likely to exhibit depressive symptoms compared to their peers who were not victimized.¹⁵ Common symptoms include sleep problems, appetite changes, emotional disturbances, and a loss of enjoyment in activities that once brought happiness.¹⁶
- **Suicidal Ideation and Behavior:** Perhaps the most alarming impact, cyberbullying is strongly linked to suicidal thoughts, attempts, and actual suicide.⁸ Young people exposed to cyberbullying are at a 50% increased risk of suicidal thoughts¹⁶ and are more than twice as likely to harm themselves and display suicidal behavior.¹⁶ Nearly 7.5% of females and 2.3% of males reported serious consideration for attempting suicide in the last year after being cyberbullied.¹⁵ The risk is particularly elevated for certain groups, with Black middle-school-aged victims being almost 135% more likely to consider and plan suicide than non-victims.¹¹
- **Low Self-Esteem and Distorted Self-Image:** Victims frequently report lower levels of self-esteem and can internalize negative comments from bullies, leading to a distorted self-image.¹⁵ In one study, 86% of respondents reported that cyberbullying impacted them, with 78% citing an impact on self-confidence and 70% on self-esteem.¹⁵
- **Anger and Frustration:** Children experiencing cyberbullying may exhibit random fits of anger and crying spells for no apparent reason, along with disproportionate reactions of anger and frustration compared to the situation.⁸

The profound mental health impacts, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, are not merely temporary distress but can lead to chronic conditions and, tragically, even death.¹¹ This highlights that cyberbullying, despite being an "online" phenomenon, inflicts very real and severe psychological trauma. The perceived "inescapable" nature of online harassment means victims often lack a safe haven, intensifying their suffering. This necessitates a public health approach to cyberbullying, integrating mental health screening and support into school systems and healthcare. It also calls for greater awareness among parents and caregivers to recognize subtle behavioral changes—such as secretiveness, withdrawal, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, and unexplained anger—as potential indicators of cyberbullying.

4.2. Academic and Social Consequences

Beyond the immediate psychological distress, cyberbullying can have far-reaching academic and social consequences that undermine a child's development:

- **Social Isolation:** Cyberbullied children may develop feelings of isolation and helplessness.¹⁵ They often avoid social activities and withdraw from friends and family in an attempt to prevent further bullying.¹⁴ This withdrawal can lead them to try to "blend in" to protect themselves, hindering their ability to form healthy friendships and

connections.¹⁵

- **Academic Difficulties:** Bullying can significantly impede a child's ability to succeed in the classroom, leading to difficulties concentrating on schoolwork.⁸ Victims may become reluctant to attend school or participate in school-related activities, such as sports or field trips, further impacting their academic progress and overall engagement.¹⁶
- **Loss of Self-Confidence and Increased Self-Criticism:** Children who are bullied often experience a profound loss of self-confidence and may internalize the negative statements from their tormentors, leading to increased self-criticism.¹⁶ They may begin to believe they are less worthy than others or do not deserve happiness and success, which can be devastating to their academic and social development.¹⁶

These impacts extend beyond immediate emotional distress to fundamental aspects of a child's development, including social interaction, academic performance, and self-perception.¹⁵ Social isolation hinders the development of healthy peer relationships, while academic difficulties can derail educational progress. The erosion of self-confidence and self-esteem undermines a child's ability to thrive and explore their potential. This emphasizes that cyberbullying is not a minor "kids being kids" issue but a serious threat to healthy child development. Interventions should therefore not only focus on stopping the bullying but also on rebuilding the child's self-worth, social connections, and academic engagement, potentially requiring multi-disciplinary support from mental health professionals, school counselors, and family.

5. Prevention and Response Strategies

Addressing cyberbullying requires a multi-layered approach involving parents, schools, and law enforcement, alongside robust reporting and support systems.

5.1. Role of Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in preventing and responding to cyberbullying. Open and honest conversations with children about online safety are paramount, fostering an environment of trust where children feel comfortable reporting concerns without fear of punishment.¹⁷ Keeping computers with internet access in open, common areas of the home and actively monitoring children's online activities and behavior are recommended practices.² Establishing clear family rules and expectations for online behavior, potentially formalized through parent/child technology agreements, can be beneficial.⁶ Reducing excessive screen time, particularly during after-school hours and at bedtime, can also limit opportunities for children to be involved in cyberbullying, either as victims or perpetrators.⁶ Furthermore, educating children to be selective about what they share online, to be wary of strangers, and

to apply privacy settings to their social media accounts can significantly reduce their exposure to risks.⁷ Turning off location data services on non-essential applications is also a recommended safety measure.¹⁹

Caregivers must also be vigilant in recognizing warning signs that may indicate cyberbullying or online grooming. These include secretiveness, defensiveness, sudden changes in appearance or mood, increased time spent online, or the presence of inappropriate content on their child's devices.²⁰ The effectiveness of parental intervention is directly tied to their digital literacy—their understanding of online platforms, associated risks, and available safety measures. Without this knowledge, parents cannot effectively implement prevention strategies or accurately interpret warning signs. This highlights a pressing need for widespread educational initiatives aimed at parents, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to navigate the digital world alongside their children, extending beyond basic safety tips to cover emerging threats and the nuances of online interactions.

5.2. School-Based Interventions and Policies

Schools are critical partners in combating cyberbullying, especially when the behavior originates within the school environment or spills over to affect it. When cyberbullying impacts the school, the institution has the authority to intervene.⁶

Prevention programs integrated into the curriculum are essential for teaching children and young people about healthy relationships and online safety, which can help prevent various forms of abuse.⁵ Examples include programs like "PANTS rules" for younger children and "Speak out Stay safe" assemblies.⁵ Collaboration between parents and schools is vital; parents can initiate meetings with school officials to discuss problems, provide documentation, and work together to develop a written intervention plan.¹ Most states have enacted bullying prevention laws that specifically include cyberbullying, often extending their reach to cover off-campus behavior that affects the school environment.¹

5.3. Reporting Mechanisms and Support Systems

Effective response to cyberbullying hinges on robust reporting mechanisms and comprehensive support systems for victims.

- **Documenting Evidence:** It is crucial for victims and their families to preserve all evidence of cyberbullying. This includes taking screenshots, saving emails, messages, and photos, forwarding hurtful texts, and recording details of any in-person incidents related to the online harassment. This "digital footprint" serves as vital evidence for investigations and interventions.¹⁹
- **Reporting to Platforms:** Most social media sites and online platforms provide mechanisms for reporting harmful behavior. Organizations like the Cyberbullying Research Center offer guidance and contact information for reporting online abuse

directly to these platforms.¹

- **Reporting to Authorities:**

- In cases of immediate danger, contacting 911 is the priority.¹³
- For suspected child sexual exploitation, sextortion, or Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), reports should be made to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) CyberTipline (www.cybertipline.org or 1-800-843-5678).²¹ The CyberTipline works in close coordination with Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces across the country.²¹
- The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) also serves as a centralized hub for receiving complaints of suspected internet crime from the public.²²

- **Victim Support:** Providing empathetic support to victims is paramount. It is essential to emphasize that "This is not your fault," "You are not alone," "We will work together," and "Bullying is never okay".¹ NCMEC offers critical services such as "Take It Down," a free service that helps victims remove nude or sexually explicit photos/videos taken before age 18 from the internet, having received over 83,000 submissions in 2024.²⁴ NCMEC also provides broader assistance and support to families impacted by child sexual exploitation, including crisis intervention, local referrals to professionals, and peer support through its "Team HOPE" program.²⁶ National helplines, such as the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, are available 24/7 for individuals experiencing feelings of hopelessness or suicidal ideation.¹³

The emphasis from multiple sources on the importance of documenting and reporting cyberbullying indicates that this is not merely a procedural step but a critical enabler for effective intervention and accountability.¹⁹ Without concrete evidence, platforms and law enforcement agencies have limited capacity to act. The persistently low rate of reporting to authorities, as indicated by various studies², reveals a significant gap in current response strategies. This suggests that public awareness campaigns must strongly advocate for immediate reporting and meticulous evidence preservation, educating children, parents, and educators on

how to do this effectively. The common reluctance to report, often stemming from fear of losing digital privileges, shame, or simply not knowing how to report, must be directly addressed through trust-building initiatives and clear communication channels, ensuring that victims feel empowered and supported in coming forward.

6. Related Online Harms and Their Intersections with Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying often exists within a broader spectrum of online harms against children, frequently escalating or intertwining with more severe forms of exploitation.

6.1. Sextortion

Sextortion is a particularly insidious form of child sexual exploitation where children are threatened or blackmailed, most often with the possibility of publicizing nude or sexual images of them, to coerce them into providing additional sexual content, engaging in sexual activity, or paying money.²⁷ This crime can originate when a child shares an image with someone they believed they knew or trusted, or more commonly, when they are targeted by individuals online who obtain sexual images through deceit, coercion, or other manipulative methods.²⁵

Perpetrators often employ sophisticated tactics, such as pretending to be peers, offering incentives like money, gifts, or in-game credits, or using explicit threats of violence or public exposure.¹⁹ They frequently attempt to move communications from public social media platforms to private messaging apps and may use multiple false online identities to conceal their true intentions.²⁵

NCMEC has observed a dramatic increase in sextortion reports, particularly financial sextortion, where the offender demands money from the child.²⁷ Teenage boys have been identified as the most common targets in these recent cases.²⁷ Tragically, since 2021, NCMEC is aware of over three dozen teenage boys who have died by suicide as a direct result of being victimized by sextortion.²⁴ The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) 2024 report further highlights the prevalence of this crime, listing extortion as one of the top cybercrimes by number of complaints received.²²

Sextortion can be viewed as an extreme form of cyberbullying, where the threats involve highly sensitive, explicit material, leading to severe psychological distress and, in the most tragic cases, suicide.²⁴ The dramatic increase in sextortion reports and the devastating link to youth suicides indicate that online harassment can rapidly escalate into criminal exploitation with life-threatening consequences. The fact that "The Com" group, which engages in sextortion, includes many minors among its members⁷, further underscores that youth can be both victims and, sometimes, unwitting perpetrators. This necessitates a seamless continuum of response, where cyberbullying prevention programs must educate about the risks of sharing explicit content and the red flags of sextortion. Law enforcement and child protection agencies must be equipped to handle the rapid escalation of these cases, as evidenced by NCMEC receiving an average of 50 urgent reports daily and escalating over 51,000 urgent reports to law enforcement in 2024.²⁴

6.2. Online Enticement and Grooming

Online enticement involves an individual communicating with someone they believe to be a child via the internet with the intent to commit a sexual offense or abduction.²⁸ Grooming is a systematic process by which a predator establishes a connection and builds trust and rapport

with a minor to gain access for sexual purposes.²⁸ This often begins with seemingly harmless interactions, where predators offer support, compliments, or gifts, gradually isolating the victim from their support systems.⁵

Common tactics used to entice and groom children include engaging in sexual conversation or role-playing, asking for or mutually sharing explicit images, pretending to be younger or a peer, and offering incentives such as gift cards, alcohol, or drugs.¹⁹ Predators may also use deception to access personal information or manipulate children into meeting offline.²⁰

The prevalence of online enticement has seen a staggering increase. NCMEC received over 546,000 reports concerning online enticement in 2024, representing a 192% increase compared to 2023.²⁴ More broadly, reports of online enticement increased by over 300% from 44,155 in 2021 to 186,819 in 2023.¹⁹ The alarming statistic that a grooming period can be "as short as 19 seconds" ¹⁹ demonstrates the extreme speed and sophistication with which predators operate. This rapid progression is facilitated by children's comfort with online interactions and image sharing.¹⁹ This highlights the inadequacy of traditional "stranger danger" warnings in the digital age. Prevention efforts must now focus on educating children about the manipulative tactics of grooming, the deceptive nature of online identities, and the permanence of shared content, emphasizing that "not everyone is who they say they are online".¹⁹

6.3. Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), federally defined as any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (under 18 years old), is a grave form of child sexual exploitation.²⁶ NCMEC prefers the term CSAM to accurately reflect that every image or video depicts actual abuse, rape, molestation, and/or exploitation of a child.²⁶

Federal law strictly prohibits the production, distribution, possession, receipt, and transportation of CSAM.³⁰ This material is found across a wide range of online environments, including social networking platforms, file-sharing sites, gaming devices, and mobile applications.²⁶ The dark web also serves as a significant hub for CSAM distribution, with some estimates indicating that 57% of dark web sites are dedicated to harmful child sexual exploitation.³⁵

In 2024, NCMEC's CyberTipline received 20.5 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, which, when adjusted for bundling of viral content, represented 29.2 million separate incidents.²⁴ While this marked a decline from 36.2 million reports in 2023 (partly attributed to a new "bundling" feature for related reports and increased implementation of end-to-end encryption by platforms), CSAM remains the largest reporting category.²⁴ These reports in 2024 contained a staggering 62.9 million images, videos, and other files related to child sexual exploitation incidents.²⁴

A particularly devastating aspect of CSAM is the re-victimization children endure when these images and videos are shared online. Each time their image of sexual abuse is viewed, child

victims suffer renewed harm, enduring a lifetime of trauma knowing the documentation of their abuse is perpetually available on the internet.²⁶

Emerging threats further complicate the landscape:

- **Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI):** NCMEC's CyberTipline observed a shocking 1,325% increase in reports involving GAI in 2024, rising from 4,700 in 2023 to 67,000 reports.²⁴ This technology can be used to create or alter images, provide guidelines for grooming, or even simulate explicit chats with children.²⁴
- **Sadistic Online Exploitation:** In 2024, over 1,300 reports were received with a nexus to violent online groups that encourage children to self-harm, harm others, create CSAM, harm animals, commit murder, and take their own lives—a more than 200% increase over the previous year.²⁴
- **"The Com" Group:** This international online threat group, notably comprising many minor members, engages in a range of criminal activities including the production and distribution of CSAM, extortion/sextortion, violent crime, and various other cybercrimes.⁷

The dramatic increase in GAI-related CSAM reports and the emergence of sophisticated groups like "The Com" clearly demonstrate that perpetrators are rapidly adopting and innovating with new technologies to exploit children.⁷ The decline in overall NCMEC reports, partly attributed to the further implementation of end-to-end encryption²⁴, further highlights how technological advancements, while beneficial for privacy, can inadvertently create "unseen" spaces for exploitation. This situation points to a critical "technological arms race" where law enforcement and child protection agencies must continuously evolve their capabilities to detect, disrupt, and prosecute these crimes. It also underscores the urgent need for enhanced collaboration between governments, law enforcement, and technology companies to implement "safety by design" principles and find solutions that protect privacy while simultaneously allowing for the detection of child sexual exploitation.

6.4. Child Sex Trafficking and Tourism

Child sex trafficking involves the selling or buying of minors for sex.³⁷ Child sex tourism, also referred to as the extraterritorial sexual exploitation of children, is defined as traveling to a foreign country with the intent to engage in sexual activity with a child.³⁸ U.S. federal law prohibits this crime, even if the acts are considered legal in the foreign country where they occur.⁴⁰

The internet plays a significant role in facilitating these crimes. It provides a means to advertise escort services and massage parlors, reaching a wide and often obscure target audience, including pedophiles and individuals with extreme sexual interests.³⁸ Technology also enables traffickers to network with other offenders and conceal their activities through methods like encrypting communications and using untraceable wireless technologies.³⁷ NCMEC reported 26,823 incidents concerning child sex trafficking in 2024, representing a 55%

increase from 2023.²⁴ This rise is partly attributed to the REPORT Act, enacted in 2024, which mandates companies to report child sex trafficking and online enticement.²⁴

The high percentage of NCMEC reports resolving outside the U.S. (84% in 2024)²⁴ and the definition of child sex tourism³⁸ clearly indicate that online child exploitation is a deeply globalized crime. Perpetrators leverage the ease of international travel and the anonymity of the internet to cross jurisdictional boundaries, making geographic location less of a concern for those targeting victims online.⁴² This necessitates robust international cooperation among law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and technology companies. NCMEC's partnerships with law enforcement in 167 countries and territories, and its function as a global clearinghouse for reports, are critical examples of the multi-national effort required to combat these crimes effectively.²⁴ These global connections facilitate the quick and seamless referral of CyberTipline reports to safeguard children and hold offenders accountable worldwide.²⁴

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1. Synthesized Key Takeaways

Cyberbullying represents a widespread and evolving challenge for U.S. youth, with varying prevalence rates across different studies but a consistent and pervasive presence in adolescents' lives. Specific demographic groups, including older girls, LGBTQ+ youth, and certain racial/ethnic minorities, face disproportionately higher rates of victimization and more severe impacts. The inherent digital nature of cyberbullying amplifies its harm, making it persistent, often anonymous, and capable of widespread dissemination, leading to profound psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and, tragically, suicidal ideation. Critically, cyberbullying exists on a continuum of online harms, frequently overlapping with or escalating into severe criminal exploitation, including sextortion, online enticement, and the production and distribution of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). These more severe forms of exploitation are rapidly increasing and evolving, driven by the adoption of new technologies like generative artificial intelligence and the emergence of sophisticated online threat groups. The ease of online communication and global reach also facilitates child sex trafficking and tourism, underscoring the international dimension of these crimes.

7.2. Recommendations

Addressing the complex and evolving landscape of cyberbullying and related online child exploitation requires a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort. Fragmented initiatives will be

insufficient; success depends on a holistic and adaptive ecosystem of safety, characterized by continuous information sharing, rapid adaptation to new threats, and a shared commitment across all sectors to prioritize child safety.

For Policymakers and Legislators:

- **Strengthen Legal Frameworks:** Develop and enforce consistent federal and state laws that clearly define and address cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and related online harms, ensuring these laws keep pace with rapid technological advancements.⁴
- **Invest in Digital Literacy Education:** Mandate and adequately fund comprehensive digital literacy and online safety education programs in schools from an early age. These programs should focus on fostering critical thinking, media literacy, healthy online relationships, and recognizing manipulative tactics.⁵
- **Promote "Safety by Design" for Technology:** Incentivize and, where necessary, legislate for technology companies to implement "safety by design" principles. This includes requiring robust content moderation, default privacy settings, and effective, user-friendly reporting mechanisms, ensuring child safety is a core consideration, not an afterthought.⁷
- **Increase Law Enforcement Resources:** Augment funding and resources for law enforcement agencies, such as Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces and the FBI, and for organizations like NCMEC. This support is crucial for developing advanced forensic capabilities, enhancing international cooperation, and effectively combating the increasingly sophisticated methods of online child exploitation.²⁴

For Educators and Schools:

- **Implement Comprehensive Prevention Programs:** Integrate robust cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs into the school curriculum. These programs should address the diverse forms of cyberbullying, their severe impacts, and strategies for safe online interactions.⁵
- **Establish Clear Policies:** Develop and enforce clear school policies on cyberbullying that explicitly cover off-campus behavior that affects the school environment or its students.¹
- **Staff Training and Support:** Provide ongoing training for all school staff to enable them to recognize the signs of cyberbullying and online exploitation, and to respond effectively and empathetically to affected students.¹⁶
- **Foster a Culture of Reporting:** Cultivate a school environment where students feel safe and empowered to report incidents to trusted adults without fear of reprisal or loss of privileges.²

For Parents and Caregivers:

- **Maintain Open Communication:** Engage in ongoing, open, and non-judgmental conversations with children about their online activities and potential risks. Foster an environment of trust where children feel comfortable disclosing their experiences, even if they involve sensitive or embarrassing content.¹⁷
- **Stay Informed on Emerging Threats:** Actively educate themselves on the latest online platforms, applications, and emerging threats, such as generative AI-driven exploitation and sophisticated online threat groups like "The Com," that their children may encounter.⁷
- **Implement Digital Safety Measures:** Utilize parental controls and privacy settings on devices and accounts. Encourage children to be selective about what they share online and cautious in their interactions with strangers, emphasizing that online identities can be deceptive.⁷
- **Recognize and Report:** Be vigilant for behavioral changes that may indicate cyberbullying or other online harms. Understand how to meticulously document incidents (e.g., screenshots) and know the appropriate channels for reporting, including direct reporting to platforms, NCMEC, or law enforcement, depending on the severity and nature of the incident.²¹

For Technology Companies:

- **Prioritize Child Safety in Design:** Integrate child safety as a fundamental principle in product design and development. This includes implementing proactive detection mechanisms for child sexual exploitation and abuse, rather than relying solely on reactive measures.⁴³
- **Enhance Content Moderation and Response:** Significantly enhance content moderation efforts and improve the speed and effectiveness of responding to reports of harmful content, including CSAM, sextortion, and grooming. Timely removal of harmful content is critical to minimize re-victimization.⁴³
- **Improve Collaboration with Law Enforcement:** Collaborate more effectively with law enforcement agencies and NCMEC by providing timely, comprehensive, and sufficient information in reports, particularly critical location data, to aid investigations and facilitate rapid intervention.²⁴
- **Invest in Counter-Threat Research:** Dedicate substantial resources to research and development aimed at countering emerging threats, such as generative AI-driven exploitation and the activities of violent online groups, to stay ahead of evolving perpetrator tactics.²⁴

The imperative for a holistic, adaptive ecosystem of safety is clear. Fragmented efforts will be insufficient to protect children in the dynamic digital landscape. Success will depend on

continuous information sharing, rapid adaptation to new threats, and a shared commitment across all sectors to prioritize child safety above other considerations. The ultimate goal is to create a digital environment where children can thrive safely, and where exploitation is swiftly detected and decisively addressed.

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