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### **Adolescent and young adult victims of cyberbullying at increased risk of suicide Female youth especially at risk**

Results released today from the National Annenberg Survey of Youth reveal that 1 out of 7 or 14% of adolescents and young adults have experienced being a victim of cyberbullying (see Table 1 below). Those who experience cyberbullying report higher rates of thinking seriously about suicide in the past year (see Table 2 below). The rate of suicidal ideation among victims of cyberbullying was about 4 times higher than among youth who had not had the experience (27.4% vs. 7.5%).

The results come from telephone interviews with nearly 600 young people ages 14 to 22 in a nationally representative sample. The survey defined cyberbullying as occurring “when someone repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text messaging or when someone posts something online like an embarrassing photo about another person they don’t like.”

Although some prior studies report a strong association between having been bullied online and suicidal ideation, the association between the two has rarely been examined in college age youth. Prior studies of adolescents also indicate that victims of cyberbullying are more likely to experience symptoms of depression than non-victims and even more than victims of other forms of bullying. The Annenberg research also found that victims of cyberbullying were more likely to experience symptoms of depression in the past year, such as sadness and hopelessness, than non-victims.

“The APPC research suggests that rates of victimization from cyberbullying have doubled in the past several years compared to other earlier studies” said Dr. Madelyn Gould of Columbia University who reviewed the findings. “Greater efforts will be needed to educate youth about the hazards of this form of bullying and to help young people cope with such abuses”

#### *Gender Differences*

The APPC findings also show more strongly than past research that female youth are at high risk of being the targets of cyberbullying. The rates of victimization for females were more than twice as high as for males among both high school (18% vs. 7%) and college age (22% vs. 10%) youth.

“While these results do not show that cyberbullying is the cause of suicidal tendencies in young people,” noted Dan Romer, Director of the Adolescent Communication Institute that conducted the survey, “they

clearly show that youth who are victims of it are also at increased risk of both depression and suicide. As a result, even if the victims were already depressed or suicidal, experiencing cyberbullying could only make a bad situation worse.”

*Perpetrators of Cyberbullying*

Smaller percentages of young people in the survey admitted to having cyberbullied others online. Approximately 8% reported such activity. However, unlike prior studies, we found no clear pattern of gender differences for cyberbullying. For adolescents in the high school age range, females were more likely to report cyberbullying another person (10% vs. 4%). However, this pattern was reversed for older youth, where males were more likely to report perpetrating cyberbullying (11% vs. 6%).

As has been found in other studies of bullying, those who engage in this practice are more likely to experience bouts of depression themselves. This was true for all ages and both genders. Also consistent with prior research, those who both engage in bullying and are its target are at increased risk of depressive symptoms; however, there were too few respondents who reported this pattern to draw firm conclusions. Also not surprisingly, the APPC findings indicate that the higher rates of depressive symptoms are associated with higher rates of suicidal ideation.

The findings clearly indicate that those who perpetrate cyberbullying are as troubled on average as those who are victims of their attacks. This suggests that school-based efforts to reduce cyberbullying may be more effective if they focus on youth who already experience symptoms of depression.

**Table 1. Percentages of Respondents Reporting Experience of Cyberbullying by Gender and Age**

|                     | Ages 14-17              |                 |                   |                        | Ages 18-22      |                   |                        |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------------|
|                     | Total Sample<br>(N=590) | Male<br>(N=145) | Female<br>(N=132) | Total 14-17<br>(N=277) | Male<br>(N=156) | Female<br>(N=157) | Total 18-22<br>(N=313) |
| <b>Victim</b>       | 14.2                    | 7.1             | 18.1              | 12.3                   | 9.6             | 22.0              | 15.8                   |
| <b>Bully</b>        | 7.7                     | 4.0             | 10.1              | 6.9                    | 10.9            | 5.8               | 8.4                    |
| <b>Bully-victim</b> | 5.1                     | 2.1             | 7.6               | 4.7                    | 4.7             | 5.8               | 5.3                    |

**Table 2. Percentages of Respondents Reporting Symptoms of Depression and Suicidal Ideation in Past Year by Victim vs. Bully Status**

| Victim vs.<br>Bully Status | Ages 14-17         |                      |                    |                      |                    |                      | Ages 18-22         |                      |                    |                      |                    |                      |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
|                            | Male               |                      | Female             |                      | Total 14-17        |                      | Male               |                      | Female             |                      | Total 18-22        |                      |
|                            | <i>(N=145)</i>     |                      | <i>(N=132)</i>     |                      | <i>(N=277)</i>     |                      | <i>(N=156)</i>     |                      | <i>(N=157)</i>     |                      | <i>(N=313)</i>     |                      |
|                            | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation | Sad or<br>Hopeless | Suicidal<br>Ideation |
| <b>Victim</b>              | 32.4               | 25.8                 | 32.8               | 30.0                 | 32.7               | 28.7                 | 56.7               | 30.7                 | 65.1               | 24.9                 | 62.6               | 26.7                 |
| <b>Bully</b>               | 72.8               | 36.5                 | 80.1               | 69.4                 | 77.9               | 59.4                 | 54.5               | 14.9                 | 81.5               | 28.3                 | 64.1               | 19.6                 |
| <b>Bully-victim*</b>       | 80.8               | 71.3                 | 73.6               | 71.1                 | 75.3               | 71.2                 | 46.7               | 34.5                 | 81.5               | 28.3                 | 66.2               | 31.0                 |
| <b>Neither</b>             | 36.8               | 9.9                  | 27.1               | 7.5                  | 32.5               | 8.8                  | 29.8               | 6.7                  | 29.3               | 5.3                  | 29.5               | 6.0                  |

\* Due to small numbers reporting both victimization and perpetration, the findings for this category are only suggestive.

**Methodology**

The survey was conducted by telephone in the summer and early fall of 2010 by Abt SRBI, Inc., using random-digit dialing procedures. The survey is designed by the Adolescent Communication Institute of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The surveys included 596 respondents in 2010 with young people ages 14 to 22 across the 48 contiguous states. The response rate was 45 percent, which is comparable to the rate obtained by the CDC in its national telephone surveys of behavioral risk factors in adults. Results are weighted to represent national proportions for age, gender, education, and region of the country. Respondents receive \$10 in appreciation for their participation. Error ranges for the survey vary with the question and subgroup examined. For the entire sample of 590 respondents, the maximum error is +/- 4.1%. For comparisons between genders in Tables 1 and 2, differences of +/-7.8% are beyond the margin of error.

All respondents were given a definition of cyberbullying and asked “How often, if ever, have you had the experience of being cyberbullied?” The definition was described as follows: “Let me describe something called cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is when someone repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text messaging or when someone posts something online like an embarrassing photo about another person they don’t like.” Following this question, respondents were asked “How often, if every, have you cyberbullied someone else?” Responses to each question were recorded as “never, once or twice, or more often.” Answers greater than never were coded as yes for the purposes of this report.

All respondents were also asked about their experiences of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in the past 12 months. These questions are commonly used in major mental health surveys with adolescents. “During the past 12 months, how often, if ever, did you feel so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing your usual activities?” and “During the past 12 months, how often, if ever, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?” Answers to both questions were recorded as “never, once, twice, three or more times”. Any answer in the affirmative was taken as yes for the purposes of this report.

*The Adolescent Communication Institute (ACI) was created by the Annenberg Foundation in 2002 as part of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. ACI aims to inform researchers, policymakers, and the public regarding strategies to prevent risks to healthy adolescent development and to enhance the well-being of youth. It conducts the annual National Annenberg Survey of Youth, the Annenberg Coding of Health and Media Project, and sponsors reviews of research regarding adolescent mental and behavioral health by panels of experts. See <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/> for more information.*

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