

Victim Reports of Bystander Reactions to In-Person and Online Peer Harassment: A National Survey of Adolescents

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Abstract Bullying prevention is increasingly targeting education to bystanders, but more information is needed on the complexities of bystander actions across a wide variety of incidents, including both online and in-person peer harassment. The current study analyzes victim report data from a nationally representative survey of youth ages 10–20 ($n = 791$; 51 % female). Bystander presence was common across all harassment incident types (80 % of incidents). In contrast to previous research, our study found that supportive bystander behaviors occurred at relatively high rates. Unfortunately, antagonistic bystander behaviors, although less common, were predictive of higher negative impact for the victim. A large percentage of victims (76 %) also disclosed the harassment to confidants, who play an important role as secondary bystanders. While friends were the most common confidant, incidents were also disclosed to adults at high rates (60 %) and with mostly positive results. The findings suggest that prevention programs could increase their impact by targeting education to both direct witnesses and confidants, and considering a wider variety of peer victimization incident types.

Keywords Bullying · Cyberbullying · Bystanders · Youth · Internet · Prevention

Introduction

Peer harassment and bullying typically occur in the presence of other youth (Craig and Pepler 1997; Nishina and Bellmore 2010; Salmivalli 2010) and many prevention programs are focusing education on bystanders in order to shift social norms and provide youth with skills to support victims (Johnson et al. 2013; Polanin et al. 2012; Salmivalli 2014). To be successful, however, prevention education must incorporate the range of different ways that bystanders react during and after an incident and across incident characteristics and contexts. Programs must also understand more about bystander behavior in new and emerging contexts. Experts have expressed concerns that cyberbullying and online harassment might increase negative bystander behaviors because of the physical distance and anonymity of online communication (Dempsey et al. 2009; Kowalski and Limber 2007; Sticca and Perren 2013), but such concerns have not yet been researched. Finally, there may also be benefits to expanding the definition of “bystander.” In addition to direct-witness bystanders, victim confidants also have an opportunity to offer support, get help, or prevent further escalation (Stueve et al. 2006). However, little is known about who youth talk to about peer victimization experiences, under what conditions, and with what results. To improve our understanding of how bystanders react across a variety of harassment incident contexts, the current study presents data on victim reports of bystander reactions, including confidants, from a nationally representative survey of victims of peer harassment.

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The Complexity of Bystander Behavior

Research on bullying finds that other youth are present in over 85 % of episodes (Craig et al. 2000; O'Connell et al. 1999; Salmivalli 2014). Most studies find that a minority of bystanders actively reach out to help the victim (10–25 %) (Craig and Pepler 1997; Nishina and Bellmore 2010; Hawkins et al. 2001). In one study of playground bullying, peers spent 54 % of their time passively watching, 21 % of their time actively modeling bullies, and 25 % of their time intervening on behalf of victims (O'Connell et al. 1999). This low rate of coming to the aid of victims is discouraging given that, when they do act, research suggests that bystanders can de-escalate incidents and improve outcomes for victims. In a naturalistic study, 57 % of assertive peer interventions were successful in stopping the bullying episodes within 10 seconds (Hawkins et al. 2001). Research has found that schools and classrooms with greater rates of bystanders defending victims have lower rates of bullying (Kärnä et al. 2011; Salmivalli et al. 2011). There also appears to be some indication that bystander behaviors may reduce negative sequelae for victims. One study found that victims with at least one “defender” are less anxious and depressed than those without, even when controlling for the frequency of victimization (Sainio et al. 2010).

To increase the success of bystander education, programs will need to ensure that messaging and skill-building strategies incorporate the complexity of how bystanders naturally react in a variety of circumstances and contexts. Olweus and colleagues have described bystander roles as “supporters”, “disengaged onlookers” or “defenders” (Olweus and Limber 2010). Others have similarly labeled bystanders as either “reinforcers or assistants of the bully,” “defenders of the victim,” or “outsiders” (Salmivalli et al. 1996). However, the meaning and outcome of bystander behavior is likely much more nuanced; and helpful or hurtful reactions are not limited to a single point in time. Peer reactions can occur during, after or even in-between events, since a bullying incident can involve multiple separate harassment experiences over time. Emerging research shows that the nature of the aggression and the relationship between the victim, perpetrator and bystander are important influences on how a bystander responds (Nishina and Bellmore 2010). One study found that bystander strategies for a victimization event are influenced by a combination of person-level variables, and cultural rules and influences at the friendship level, the peer group level, and the institutional level (e.g., school) (Ferrás et al. 2012). Narrowing bystander behavior to a few possible roles when directly witnessing a bullying or harassment incident in person may miss much of the social dynamics

that typify the complexity of many youth harassment and bullying experiences.

Bystander Behavior in New Contexts

It is also important to examine bystander behaviors in new bullying and harassment contexts so that their incorporation in prevention programming is research-based. Experts have worried that technology-based harassment and bullying may be particularly harmful to victims because it can involve many bystanders quickly, and facilitate group negativity and harassing behavior (Dempsey et al. 2009; Kowalski and Limber 2007; Sticca and Perren 2013). However, there has been little research on these concerns. In fact, the influence of new technology on bullying may not be as straightforward as many have assumed. Separately published analysis of data from the current study found that incidents involving a combination of in-person and technology-based harassment were more distressing for victims than either in-person only harassment, or harassment that only happened online (Mitchell et al. 2015). Understanding how bystander behaviors differ across these contexts may help clarify why incidents vary in their impact with implications for directing intervention and prevention responses.

Finally, there are important benefits to broadening the definition of bystanders to include any person, peer or adult, who becomes aware of the harassment and has an opportunity to help. In particular, someone who hears about the victimization through a disclosure from the victim is an important “secondary” bystander, with the opportunity to support the victim emotionally and prevent further harassment or bullying. In a review of the role of bystanders in school violence incidents, Stueve et al. (2006) note that narrow definitions of bystanders as witnesses neglect situations in which individuals may learn of aggression or violence that has already happened or that might happen in the future. They also encourage an expansion of the definition from a focus on youth and students, to one that includes adults. In fact, much of the popular bullying prevention messaging encourages bystanders to report victimization to school authorities, parents or police, but research on the responses and actions by these adult confidants is limited. One study surveying youth in 25 schools in 12 states found that 71 % told a friend about their harassment victimization, 58 % told a parent and 42 % told an adult at school (Davis and Nixon 2010). Adults were rated as most helpful if they listened, gave advice, and checked in afterwards to see if the behavior stopped. More research is needed on how youth disclose harassment and how those who are told about the victimization, particularly adults, can respond supportively.

Current Study

To increase our understanding of bystander behavior in reaction to peer victimization, we analyzed victim report data on harassment incidents described by a nationally representative sample of 791 youth. Youth victims were asked about the responses of both direct bystanders (witnesses) and secondary bystanders (victim confidants) in reaction to the incident. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that: (1) the numbers of direct bystanders would be high across all harassment types, both online, offline and mixed online/offline incidents; (2) passive or antagonistic bystanders would be high, while positive reactions by bystanders would be low; and (3) victim distress would be higher when bystanders behaved antagonistically and lower when bystanders responded positively. Given that there has been little previous research on differences in bystander behavior at the incident level, we explored the question of how bystander actions varied across incident types and characteristics, including the three types of technology involvement. We also examined the reactions of victim confidants, hypothesizing, based on prior research, that victims would mostly disclose to friends and more rarely to adults and that when they were told, adults would mostly not respond effectively according to youth. Finally, we explored how disclosure and confidant reactions varied across online, in-person, and mixed incidents, and examined victim reasons for not disclosing harassment to adults.

Methods

Sample

Survey respondents were a nationally representative sample of youth ($n = 791$) ages 10–20 years old (51 % female) who were interviewed by telephone for the Technology Harassment and Victimization Survey (THV), from December 2013 to March 2014. The current study focuses on a subsample of these youth respondents ($n = 230$, 34 % weighted) who reported at least one incident of peer harassment victimization in the past year. The article presents information on bystander behavior in the 311 peer harassment incidents reported by these youth. The survey sample was drawn from youth who had completed a previous survey, the Second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV II) 2 years prior, in 2011–2012 (Finkelhor et al. 2013). The response rate for the original NatSCEV II survey was 40 percent, acceptable for national random-digit dial surveys (Kohut et al. 2012). NatSCEV II households were contacted for the THV

survey if: (1) youth were at least eight years old during the NatSCEV II survey, and (2) NatSCEV II caregivers had agreed to be re-contacted for a follow-up study. The eligible sample pool consisted of 2127 youth age 10–20 years at the time of the THV data collection. Youth respondents who completed the survey were sent a \$25 check.

Final weights were created for the 791 youth (36 % response rate) who completed the THV interview. These weights adjusted the original NatSCEV II weights to correct for the nonresponse and attrition that occurred for the THV follow-up survey. Sample weights were calculated using age, race/ethnicity, household income, number of children in household, parent demographics, and child's victimization and delinquent behavior as measured by the NatSCEV II survey. Follow-up nonresponse analyses indicated that the THV survey nonresponse biases were successfully ameliorated when the nonresponse adjusted weights were used. Complete details about THV survey methodology, non-response analysis, and weight construction can be found in the study methodology report, available online (Abt SRBI, Inc. 2014).

Procedures

After a brief parent survey, interviewers obtained consent from the parent and assent from the youth to proceed to the youth's portion of the interview. Respondents who disclosed serious threats or ongoing victimizations during the interview were re-contacted by a clinical member of the research team trained in telephone crisis counseling, who stayed in contact with the respondent until the situation was appropriately addressed locally. All procedures involving human subjects were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university.

Measures

Harassment Incidents

Respondents were asked whether they had any past year experience of peer harassment including: (1) someone calling them mean names, making fun of them, or teasing them in a hurtful way; (2) someone excluding or ignoring them or getting others to turn against them; (3) someone spreading false rumors about them or sharing something that was meant to be private (such as a private picture); and (4) someone hitting, kicking, pushing, shoving, or threatening to hurt them. Interviewers asked the youth to focus first on harassment incidents that “involved the internet or a cell phone in some way” through such applications as text messages, mail, or social networking sites and second on incidents that did not involve technology.

If a youth had experienced any harassment incidents in the past year, the interviewer followed a protocol to have the youth identify *up to two unique incidents* for detailed follow-up questioning, with technology-related incidents taking priority. If they had experienced more than two incidents, youth were asked to select the most recent and the most memorable for follow-up. Of the 791 youth who participated in the THV survey, 230 or 34 % (weighted) had experienced at least one incident in the past year. Follow-up data were collected on 311 unique incidents for these 230 youth. There were no differences between youth who did and did not report a harassment experience in terms of age, gender, race or SES. However, youth with a harassment experience were more likely to live with a parent and step-parent versus two biological parents ($F = 3.51, p < .05$). The current article analyzes victim experiences at the incident level ($n = 311$). For some analyses, incidents were classified into three mutually exclusive groups: (1) in-person only harassment (i.e., no technology involvement, $n = 136$); (2) technology-only harassment (i.e., no in-person elements, $n = 58$); and (3) mixed harassment (i.e., both in-person and technology elements, $n = 117$).

Harassment Incident Characteristics Follow-up questions about the harassment incident included questions about the perpetrator (e.g., number of perpetrators, age, gender, relationship to respondent), duration and location of the event, type of harassment (i.e., verbal, exclusion, rumors, physical), and aggravating features (e.g., sexual content, physical injury, power differential, bias content, mutual harassment; see Table 1). Most variables were dummy coded '1' if the incident involved the characteristic described. Some variables were categorical. *Perpetrator relationship* included three categories: current or ex-dating partner or friend (32 %); acquaintance, neighbor, or schoolmate (57 %); and stranger, someone met online, or other (11 %). *Duration of incident* included three categories: 1 day (41 %); more than a day but less than a month (37 %); or 1 month or longer (22 %). The presence of a *power imbalance* was measured two ways: respondents were asked whether the harasser had more physical power than them (e.g., older, stronger; 70 %), or whether they had more social power (e.g., more popular, richer; 69 %).

Negative Impact of Incident Youth were asked about whether the incident made them feel “upset”, “afraid”, “embarrassed”, “worried”, “angry”, “sad”, “like you couldn’t trust people”, or “unsafe.” Responses to each of these eight items were on a five point scale from 1—“not at all” to 5—“extremely”. *Any high emotional impact* was a dummy variable coded 1 if the child responded “very” or “extremely” to any of the eight items for that incident.

Youth were also asked about whether they had experienced five school-related impacts as a result of the incident including losing any friends, staying home from school, avoiding any school activities, skipping classes, or getting worse grades/getting behind on schoolwork. A dummy variable *any school impact* was coded 1 if the youth reported experiencing at least one of these outcomes. Finally, *any physical health impact* was coded 1 if the child reported experiencing any of five physical health outcomes as a result of the incident (headache, trouble sleeping, changes in eating or drinking, upset stomach, or feeling tired).

Bystander Behavior During Incident Youth were asked: “Was there anyone who saw what happened to you besides the person or people who did this?” If yes, follow-up questions asked about the number of bystanders and their responses. Questions asked about a number of possible bystander behaviors including supportive reactions (e.g., tell the person who was being mean to stop), antagonistic reactions (e.g., joining in or making it worse for you), or ambiguous responses (e.g., coming closer to see what happened). Because there could be many bystanders for a given incident, multiple bystander behaviors could be selected. For some analyses, we created a “supportive response variable” that identified whether any one of four possible positive bystander responses were experienced by the victim (told the harasser to stop, tried to make the victim feel better, talked to other kids to get them to help, told victim they were sorry it happened), and a “negative response variable” (joined in or made it worse laughed at victim) that identified whether either of two possible negative bystander responses were experienced.

Victim Disclosure of Incident Respondents were asked: “Have you ever told someone about what happened? This could be a friend, brother or sister, parent or someone else.” If yes, follow-up questions asked who they disclosed to and the reaction of the persons they told. If they told an adult, they were asked what the response by the adult was and whether the response made things better, made things worse, or had no effect. If the respondent had not told an adult about their harassment experiences, they were asked about a number of possible reasons for not letting an adult know about the harassment (e.g., “I handled it myself,” “Not serious enough,” etc.)

Demographic Variables

Caregivers provided demographic information, including the child’s sex (51 % female), age ($M = 14.7$, linearized standard error (SE) = 0.2, Range: 10–20), race/ethnicity (White non-Hispanic (58.8 %), Black non-Hispanic (12.6 %),

Table 1 Harassment incident characteristics

Characteristics	Harassment incidents (n = 311) weighted % (n)
Victim age	
10–12 years old	45 (104)
13–15 years old	23 (90)
16–17 years old	22 (90)
18–20 years old	10 (27)
Victim gender (female)	39 (152)
Victim race/ethnicity	
White, non-Hispanic	60 (230)
Black, non-Hispanic	9 (33)
Other race, non-Hispanic	11 (22)
Hispanic or Latino, any race	20 (26)
Victim socioeconomic status (SES)	
Low SES	21 (58)
Middle SES	64 (187)
High SES	15 (66)
Harassment context	
In-person only	54 (136)
Technology-based	15 (58)
Mixed in-person and technology-based	31 (117)
Multiple perpetrators (2 or more)	45 (136)
Perpetrator relationship to victim	
Stranger or someone met online	11 (39)
Friend or dating partner (or ex-)	32 (140)
Schoolmate or acquaintance	57 (132)
Type of harassment	
Verbal	74 (249)
Exclusion	48 (175)
Rumors	39 (153)
Physical violence or threats of violence	45 (100)
Power differential	
Physical power differential	70 (196)
Social power differential	69 (216)
Knew embarrassing things about victim	20 (94)
Duration	
1 day	41 (108)
>1 day - <1 month	37 (129)
1 month or longer	22 (72)
Physically injured (any)	31 (53)
Bias/hate content	24 (81)
Sexual content	14 (34)
Victim harassed perpetrator also	53 (155)
Negative impact of incident on victim	
High negative emotional impact	69 (194)
Physical health impact	49 (137)
Academic or school impact	41 (139)

other race non-Hispanic (8.1 %), and Hispanic any race (20.6 %), and socio-economic status (SES; see Table 1). The SES variable was a composite variable created by summing the standardized z-scores of household income and household education (the most highly educated adult/household head), and converting the resulting sums to mean standardized z-scores. The continuous SES scores were then converted into a categorical SES variable by defining three groups as low SES [more than 1 standard deviation (SD) below the mean SES score], medium SES (SES score between -1 and 1 SD of mean) and high SES (scores of more than 1 SD above mean).

Data Analysis

All data analyses were conducted using Stata 13. To examine bystander behavior at the incident-level, weighted percentages were calculated for the total sample and across three technology-involved incident types (in-person only, online-only, and mixed in-person/online incidents). Differences across the incident types were examined using cross-tabulations and reporting Chi square statistics. Because youth could report up to two incidents, statistical adjustments were made for non-independence of incidents experienced by the same child by using the “svyset” and “svy” commands in Stata, which provides statistical adjustment for clustered data. Incidents were clustered on respondent ID number and analyses were weighted as described in the Methods section above. Statistical significance was set at $p < .10$ because many of the cell sizes for analyses were small, and given that efforts to examine bystander behavior across a wide range of peer harassment incident types, including those that involve technology, is a relatively new area of study, we wanted to accept a slightly higher possibility of a Type I error in order to reduce the chance of Type II errors. Cautions are noted in the sections below as appropriate.

Logistic regression analyses were conducted examining the relationship between harassment incident characteristics and three types of bystander response: telling an adult, any other supportive bystander response, and a negative bystander response, controlling for child demographics. Regression analyses also examined the three bystander responses and youth reports of high negative emotional impact, any physical health impact, or negative school impact, controlling for demographics and other aggravating incident characteristics. Finally, to examine harassment victim disclosure behaviors for each incidence, weighted percentages were calculated on disclosure variables for the total sample and across the three types of harassment incident categories. Differences across the incident types were examined using cross-tabulations and reporting Chi square statistics.

Results

Bystander Behavior

Across the 311 peer harassment incidents, 80 % involved the presence of at least one bystander in addition to the respondent and the harassing youth (see Table 2). There were no differences in whether a bystander was present across in-person only harassment, technology-only harassment, or mixed in-person/technology-based incidents. Regardless of technology involvement, the majority of harassment incidents with bystanders involved between 1–10 bystanders (65 % of all incidents). However, when technology was involved, a higher percentage (20 %) of incidents involved a very large number of bystanders (26 or more) than for in-person only harassment incidents (3 %).

Examining bystander behaviors during the incident, supportive reactions were most common. In 70 % of incidents, victims reported that a bystander tried to make them feel better. In over half of the harassment incidents a bystander told the victim that they were sorry it happened (55 %), or told the harasser to stop (53 %). Ambiguous responses were also common: in around half of the incidents, bystanders avoided the person being mean (58 %), came closer or stayed to see the harassment happen (51 %) or left the situation (43 %). In 43 % of incidents a bystander told an adult about what happened and in about a quarter of the incidents, a bystander tried to get other youth to help (26 %) or threatened the harassing youth (27 %). Negative behaviors by bystanders were less common, but still occurred in about a quarter of incidents. In 24 % of incidents, bystanders joined in or made the harassment worse. In 23 % of incidents, bystanders laughed at the victim.

There were only a few significant differences across the three types of incidents (in-person only, tech-only, and mixed incidents). Bystander reactions and involvement were most common in incidents that involved a combination of both in-person and technology-based harassment. This was the case even compared to online only harassment incidents, which had similar numbers of bystanders. The mixed incidents were more likely to involve bystanders who told the victim they were sorry it happened, came closer or stay to see the harassment happen, talked with other kids to get them to help, and, joined in the harassment and made it worse.

We were interested in the types of incident characteristics in which bystanders involved an adult, were supportive of victims, or were antagonistic. Bystanders were most likely to tell an adult about harassment that involved multiple perpetrators, physical violence, victim injury, incidents that lasted a month or longer, a social power

difference between the victim and perpetrator or sexual content (see Table 3). Supportive bystander behaviors were more likely in situations that involved rumor spreading, when the perpetrator knew embarrassing things about the victim, or when sexual remarks were part of the harassment. Negative bystander behaviors were most likely to occur when incidents involved: multiple perpetrators, exclusion behaviors, rumor-spreading, a social power differential between the victim and the harasser, a perpetrator who knew embarrassing things about the victim, a greater number of bystanders, harassment that occurred over a longer duration, or physical injury.

Controlling for demographic variables and incident characteristics that have been linked to greater victim distress, supportive bystander behaviors or telling an adult had no relationship with negative impact of the incident on victims (see Table 4). However, when bystanders reacted in antagonistic ways there was a significantly greater odds that the incident had a high negative emotional impact ($OR = 7.7, p < .01$), negative physical health impact ($OR = 11.5, p < .001$), and negative school impact for victims ($OR = 2.3, p < .10$).

Victim Disclosure

The survey data indicated that youth told someone about the harassment experience in 78 % of incidents (see Table 5). There was a significantly greater likelihood of disclosure for incidents that either only occurred online (88 %), or for harassment that occurred both online and in-person (87 %), compared with in-person only harassment (69 %). There were almost no differences across technology involvement categories in who youth chose to confide in. However, youth were more likely to involve teachers in in-person only incidents (54 %) compared to online-only (14 %) or mixed incidents (36 %).

In the majority of cases (60 %) youth told at least one adult about the harassment experience, with no differences by tech involvement. We asked youth what adults did in response, and in only a small minority of cases youth reported that the adult “did nothing” (11 %). When responding, adults typically spoke to the harasser (51 %), spoke to the harasser’s parents (38 %), or spoke with a school staff person (32 %). Respondents indicated that the adults’ response mostly “made things better” (53 %). In less than 1 % of cases was the adult intervention seen as making things worse. There were no differences across technology involvement categories in terms of adult response or impact. The only exception was that in mixed in-person and technology harassment, the adult who was told was significantly more likely to speak to a counselor about the incident (20 %) compared to in-person only harassment (5 %) or tech-only harassment (0 %).

Table 2 Harassment incident bystander involvement

Bystander involvement	All harassment incidents (n = 311) weighted % (n)	In-person only incident (n = 136) weighted % (n)	Tech-only incident (n = 58) weighted % (n)	Mixed in-person and technology based (n = 117) weighted % (n)	Design-based F
Any bystander	80 (n = 234)	77 (n = 98)	87 (n = 43)	81 (n = 93)	0.77
Number of bystanders ^a					
1–10	65 (145)	68 (68)	64 (25)	60 (52)	2.43 [†]
11–25	24 (42)	29 (21)	16 (7)	19 (14)	
26 or more	12 (43)	3 (6)	20 (10)	21 (27)	
Bystander behaviors					
Tried to make victim feel better	70 (155)	70 (59)	58 (27)	76 (69)	0.61
Ignored or avoided person being mean	58 (127)	63 (52)	37 (23)	61 (52)	1.55
Told the harasser to stop	53 (119)	47 (46)	52 (22)	62 (51)	0.56
Told victim they were sorry it happened	55 (128)	46 (45)	41 (24)	75 (59)	4.33*
Came closer or stayed to see it happen	51 (119)	44 (48)	34 (20)	70 (51)	4.07*
Left the situation	43 (109)	42 (39)	39 (23)	46 (47)	0.08
Told an adult about what happened	43 (72)	50 (26)	23 (9)	41 (37)	1.35
Threatened the person being mean	27 (46)	23 (10)	30 (13)	32 (23)	0.22
Talked to other kids to get them to help	26 (56)	21 (16)	11 (7)	43 (33)	3.37*
Joined in or made it worse	24 (62)	16 (20)	19 (8)	40 (34)	2.74 [†]
Laughed at victim	23 (59)	24 (21)	11 (5)	29 (33)	0.92

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$

^a Missing data (n = 4)

For harassment incidents (n = 125) in which a youth did not tell an adult, we asked them about a range of possible reasons. The respondents noted most commonly that it “wasn’t serious enough” (86 %) or the situation “just stopped” (91 %). There was also a substantial percentage who reported that “adults wouldn’t think it was important enough” (43 %) or indicated that they were too “ashamed or embarrassed” (40 %). There were some differences across the technology-involvement incident categories. Youth were significantly more likely to cite lack of proof and lack of seriousness as reasons for not involving adults in in-person only harassment compared to technology-involved harassment. They were most likely to feel that there was nothing adults could do to help in technology-only harassment. In mixed technology-based and in-person incidents they were more likely to worry that adults would think it was their fault, or that disclosing to an adult would get the harasser in trouble, in comparison to in-person only or tech-only harassment.

Discussion

The current study provides nationally representative findings on bystander reactions in peer harassment incidents as reported by youth victims. The results support findings by

previous research that bystanders are a common presence in peer harassment (Craig et al. 2000; O’Connell et al. 1999; Salmivalli 2014). Bystanders reacted in multiple ways, both supportive and antagonistic, and their behaviors were similar for in-person or online harassment incidents, with few differences. Incidents involving both in-person and online aggression elements had the highest rates of bystander activity, both positive and negative, suggesting some types of harassment are more likely to draw involvement from extended peer groups. Additionally, youth disclosed the majority of incidents to peers and adults. The study findings support that the increasing focus of prevention programs on bystander education has strong potential, but that program impact could be improved by expanding the definition of bystander and considering a broader range of harassment incident contexts.

Our findings differ in two ways from previous studies on youth bystander behavior. First, we found that rather than being primarily negative or even passive, a high percentage of bystanders are behaving in supportive ways, such as trying to make the victim feel better or telling the victim they were sorry it happened. Unfortunately, these behaviors did not have an impact on lessening the distress for victims, at least as far as our study was able to determine. This is in contrast to negative bystander behavior which predicted greater victim distress. Second, contrary to conventional

Table 3 Adjusted odds for bystander responses based on harassment incident characteristics (N = 234)

Incident characteristic	Bystander told an adult (n = 72) aOR (95 % CI) ^a	Other supportive bystander response (n = 182) ^a aOR (95 % CI) ^c	Negative bystander response (n = 84) ^b aOR (95 % CI) ^c
Multiple perpetrators (2 or more)	2.9 (1.1, 7.6)*	1.0 (0.4, 2.4)	4.9 (1.8, 13.7)**
Perpetrator relationship to victim			
Friend or dating partner (or ex)	1.0 (0.3, 3.0)	1.1 (0.5, 2.7)	1.5 (0.6, 3.8)
Schoolmate or acquaintance	1.4 (0.6, 3.2)	1.1 (0.4, 2.8)	0.9 (0.4, 2.0)
Type of harassment			
Verbal	0.5 (0.1, 1.8)	1.1 (0.4, 2.7)	0.5 (0.1, 1.9)
Exclusion	0.6 (0.2, 1.3)	1.0 (0.4, 2.7)	3.8 (1.6, 8.9)**
Rumors	1.2 (0.5, 2.8)	3.5 (1.4, 8.6)**	2.7 (0.8, 8.6) [†]
Physical violence or threats of violence	3.1 (1.3, 7.0)**	1.1 (0.4, 3.1)	1.2 (0.5, 3.0)
Power differential			
Physical power differential	0.7 (0.2, 2.1)	0.8 (0.3, 2.2)	1.3 (0.5, 3.7)
Social power differential	2.7 (0.9, 8.1) [†]	1.7 (0.7, 4.1)	8.4 (2.7, 26.0)***
Knew embarrassing things about victim	1.0 (0.3, 3.8)	7.5 (2.6, 21.7)***	2.5 (0.9, 6.7) [†]
Degree of technology involvement			
In-person only	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
Through technology only	0.4 (0.1, 1.4)	0.4 (0.1, 1.5)	0.4 (0.1, 2.1)
Mixed in-person and technology	0.8 (0.3, 2.5)	1.9 (0.7, 5.2)	2.0 (0.7, 5.6)
Number of bystanders			
1–10	(ref)	(ref)	(ref)
11–25	1.1 (0.4, 3.1)	0.9 (0.3, 3.0)	3.8 (1.5, 9.6)**
26 or more	0.5 (0.1, 1.8)	0.8 (0.2, 2.9)	2.5 (0.9, 6.6) [†]
Lasted 1 month or longer	3.2 (1.1, 9.1)*	2.3 (0.8, 6.3)	4.1 (1.6, 10.3)**
Physically injured	3.4 (1.2, 9.0)*	1.6 (0.7, 3.5)	4.0 (1.3, 13.0)*
Bias/hate content	1.4 (0.5, 3.7)	2.0 (0.6, 6.5)	1.8 (0.7, 4.8)
Sexual content	2.4 (0.9, 6.2) [†]	17.5 (1.7, 181.7)**	3.9 (0.7, 21.7)
Victim harassed perpetrator also	0.8 (0.3, 2.2)	1.6 (0.6, 4.3)	0.9 (0.3, 2.3)

aOR adjusted odds ratios, CI confidence intervals, Ref reference category

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

^a A bystander told harasser to stop, tried to make victim feel better, talked to other kids to get them to help, or told victim they were sorry it happened

^b A bystander joined in the harassment or made it worse, or laughed at the victim

^c Adjusted for youth age, gender, race, SES, and family structure

wisdom that suggests most victims of peer harassment do not tell adults, our study found that victims disclose the majority of incidents to adults (60 %), and mostly with positive results. When victims chose not to disclose, it was typically because they felt the incident was not serious enough to involve adults, but sometimes because they were too embarrassed or worried it would get them into trouble.

Bystander Behavior

The data from this study indicate that bystanders are not passive witnesses, but are reacting to and engaging the victim and harasser in a variety of ways. As has been found in previous research using school-based samples and observations

(Craig et al. 2000; O'Connell et al. 1999; Salmivalli 2014), our national sample of youth harassment victims described high rates of bystander involvement (80 %). However, in contrast to previous research findings, which cite low rates of bystander support (Craig and Pepler 1997; Hawkins et al. 2001; Nishina and Bellmore 2010), victims in our study reported that supportive behaviors by bystanders were common. In 80 % of incidents where a bystander was involved, someone told the harasser to stop, tried to make the victim feel better, talked to other youth to get them to help, or told the victim they were sorry it happened. The higher rates of supportive reactions we found may be due to the fact that we did not limit bystander behavior to only those occurring during a victimization event.

Table 4 Odds of negative impact based on bystander responses to harassment incidents (N = 234)

Bystander response	Any high negative emotional impact (n = 155) aOR (95 % CI) ^a	Any physical health impact (n = 108) aOR (95 % CI) ^a	Any academic or school impact (n = 108) aOR (95 % CI) ^a
Told an adult	1.0 (0.3, 3.6)	1.8 (0.6, 5.1)	0.5 (0.1, 1.3)
Other supportive response	1.6 (0.5, 4.7)	1.9 (0.7, 5.2)	0.9 (0.3, 2.4)
Negative response	7.7 (2.0, 28.8)**	11.5 (4.3, 30.8)***	2.3 (0.9, 5.7) [†]

aOR adjusted odds ratios, CI confidence intervals, Ref reference category

[†] $p < .10$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

^a Adjusted for youth age, gender, race, SES, and family structure and incident-level characteristics predictive of negative impact (i.e., injury, social power differential, physical power differential, sexual content, bias content, multiple perpetrators, long duration, victim also aggressing)

Negative behaviors by bystanders were less common, but increased during incidents that had other aggravating characteristics (Turner et al. in press). Specifically, negative bystander behaviors were more likely to occur in harassment that happened over a longer period of time and involved exclusion, social power differential, physical injury, or sexual harassment. Interestingly, some kinds of incidents, for example those involving rumors or perpetrators who were socially more powerful and knew embarrassing things about victims, were more likely to elicit both positive and negative reactions from bystanders, suggesting that some kinds of victimization occur in more complex social contexts. Unfortunately, our findings suggest that the salience of negative bystander reactions for victims is stronger than supportive reactions. Controlling for the aggravating features described above, as well as demographic differences, our study found a significant relationship between negative bystander reactions and youth emotional and physical distress as a result of the incidence. Supportive reactions were unrelated to impact of the incident.

Technology made less of a difference for bystander behaviors than might be predicted given common assumptions that online harassment is worse for victims because anonymity and exposure can encourage a “mob mentality” (Dempsey et al. 2009; Kowalski and Limber 2007; Sticca and Perren 2013). Both positive and negative bystander behaviors generally happened at similar rates for online and in-person harassment. Although it will be important to confirm with future research, there appeared to be a pattern in which harassment incidents that involved both in-person and technology-based harassment components were more likely to have higher rates of both negative and positive bystander activity. In these “mixed” incidents, bystanders were more likely to talk to other kids to get them to help, involve an adult, come closer or stay around to see what was happening, and join in and make it worse. Our previous research (Mitchell et al. 2015) found that these mixed location incidents are particularly intense

events, having more aggravating features and producing more distress for victims.

Disclosure and Adult Response

Those who hear about the harassment experience from the victim play an important role in prevention and support as well. Our findings indicate that youth frequently told others about their harassment experience, most typically other youth. However, in 60 % of incidents the youth told an adult and slightly over half the time they felt adults made the situation better after being told. Youth who did not tell an adult had multiple reasons for not doing so. Most felt like they could handle it on their own and did not need adult intervention. However, a substantial proportion of those who decided not to involve an adult did so because they were embarrassed, afraid the perpetrator would make it worse if they did, or feared the adults would make it worse.

Some differences in disclosure patterns were found across technology involvement. In-person only harassment was more likely to be disclosed to a teacher than technology-based harassment, likely because such incidents are more likely to be physical and happen at school. Adults were more likely to involve a counselor in incidents with both in-person and technology-based harassment. And youth victims of these kinds of incidents were more likely to not tell an adult because of worries that the adult would blame them or it would get the harasser in trouble. These findings further support conclusions that incidents with mixed in-person and online harassment are complex negative emotional and social peer group events for victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (Mitchell et al. 2015).

Implications for Prevention and Research

The current study documents that bystanders are playing an active role in harassment incidents, including many positive efforts. Bystander programs can support and extend

Table 5 Harassment incident disclosure experiences

Disclosure experiences	All harassment incidents (n = 311) weighted % (n)	In-person only incident (n = 136) weighted % (n)	Tech-only incident (n = 58) weighted % (n)	Mixed in-person and technology based (n = 117) weighted % (n)	Design-based F
Told someone what happened	78 (n = 257)	69 (n = 100)	88 (n = 48)	87 (n = 109)	4.32*
Friend	81 (213)	76 (81)	77 (39)	89 (93)	1.16
Brother or sister	23 (84)	22 (27)	16 (9)	27 (48)	0.59
Parent	56 (151)	63 (66)	33 (22)	57 (63)	1.85
Other adult relative	26 (56)	24 (21)	19 (3)	32 (32)	0.47
Teacher or another adult at school	41 (92)	54 (41)	14 (8)	36 (43)	3.82*
Counselor, psychologist, social worker, or other mental health care provider	14 (35)	16 (11)	5 (2)	16 (22)	0.55
Doctor or nurse	5 (9)	6 (5)	3 (1)	3 (3)	0.28
Some other adult	10 (29)	8 (12)	1 (1)	16 (16)	2.47
Someone known only online	6 (29)	4 (8)	17 (10)	6 (11)	3.65*
Told an adult	60 (n = 186)	56 (n = 77)	53 (n = 27)	71 (n = 82)	1.53
In response, adult					
Made things better	53 (103)	42 (44)	76 (16)	59 (43)	
Made things worse	1 (3)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (1)	
Made no difference	35 (50)	45 (17)	16 (8)	29 (25)	
Did nothing	11 (29)	12 (13)	8 (3)	11 (13)	1.16
What adult did					
Spoke to harasser	51 (71)	57 (30)	30 (8)	51 (33)	0.97
Spoke to harasser's parents	38 (57)	50 (22)	16 (4)	31 (31)	1.73
Spoke to a teacher or school staff person	32 (46)	43 (20)	17 (3)	22 (23)	1.37
Spoke to counselor	10 (21)	5 (6)	0 (0)	20 (15)	3.45*
Spoke to a doctor or nurse	1 (4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (4)	0.84
Reason did not tell an adult	(n = 125)	(n = 59)	(n = 31)	(n = 35)	
Not serious enough	86 (99)	94 (47)	79 (26)	73 (26)	2.91 [†]
Lack of proof	21 (21)	31 (15)	3 (2)	8 (4)	4.50*
Adults wouldn't believe me	7 (12)	5 (5)	11 (2)	10 (5)	0.63
Adults would think it was my fault	10 (19)	3 (6)	4 (2)	33 (11)	16.99***
Adults wouldn't think it was important enough	43 (42)	50 (20)	52 (14)	21 (8)	1.75
Nothing adults could do to help	38 (44)	32 (15)	73 (18)	27 (11)	2.95 [†]
Adults would make it worse	36 (44)	32 (18)	25 (8)	52 (18)	0.97
I had a bad experience telling an adult before	33 (33)	34 (13)	23 (6)	39 (14)	0.32
Afraid of getting in trouble	24 (22)	25 (10)	6 (3)	35 (9)	1.21
Afraid harasser would make it worse	37 (40)	39 (19)	25 (7)	41 (14)	0.33
Ashamed or embarrassed	40 (35)	48 (17)	16 (5)	38 (13)	1.46
Didn't want to get harasser in trouble	15 (23)	10 (10)	4 (1)	37 (12)	5.47**
Situation just stopped	91 (101)	91 (45)	98 (30)	86 (26)	1.57

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

these behaviors, and highlight them when working to increase positive social norms. The fact that negative bystander behavior is so detrimental to victims suggests that prevention programs should help school officials identify and intervene quickly in intensely negative incidents to support victims. Specifically, harassment incidents lasting a month or longer, those involving relational bullying, exclusion and social power imbalances, those marked by both in-school and online harassment behavior, and those involving bias and sexual harassment are not only more distressing for victims, but more likely to result in negative participation from other youth. These characteristics mark situations where active intervention is needed by parents and school staff to support the victim and de-escalate the situation.

The findings from this study also suggest that more research is needed to better understand the complexities of bystander behaviors. As has been found in previous research, our study finds that bystander behavior is clearly affected by social relationships and the context of the harassment and bullying (Ferrás et al. 2012). It is likely that victims' interpretation of bystander behavior and its impact on them will similarly be influenced by context. We categorized some bystander reactions as positive (e.g., bystanders telling the victim they were sorry it happened), but research has not adequately looked at what kinds of behaviors victims themselves find most supportive, by whom, and under what conditions. It was concerning to us that there was no relationship between supportive reactions by bystanders and improved outcomes for victims. More research is needed to identify how bystander support can best reduce the negative impact of bullying and harassment. There were also a number of bystander behaviors that were common but ambiguous, such as: avoiding or ignoring the aggressor, coming close or staying around to see what happens, or leaving the situation for example. There is an assumption in the literature that such behaviors are not helpful for victims, but it is important to understand more about why bystanders react in these ways, and how victims interpret those reactions. Finally, bystanders can and likely do behave in different ways at many time points during or following an incident, or between events in incidents with long durations. Future bystander research should expand not only the types of reactions that are studied but also their timing.

Furthermore, decisions about how to help victims are relevant not only for bystanders as they have been traditionally defined, but also for youth and adults who hear about the harassment from the victim. In most incidents, youth tell several people about the harassment, including adults. While half of the victims who disclosed to adults found that it improved the situation, the other half found telling an adult made no difference. This suggests an

opportunity for programs to help adults build better response skills. Few youth reported that adult intervention made the situation worse, and this might be useful data to provide youth, many who appear to hesitate to involve adults for that reason. Perhaps even more influentially, prevention programs could improve the response skills of other youth. Friends are the primary confidants according to our study, and education might focus on helping youth build skills around listening, reflecting and problem-solving when a friend discloses bullying and harassment.

Study Limitations

There are limitations to this research that need to be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. The main focus of the study was on technology-involved harassment so such incidents are slightly over-represented. Due to time constraints, interviewers could not ask about the details of more than two incidents and because we were most interested in harassment that involved technology, those incidents received priority. Consequently, some non-technology incidents reported by respondents were not the subject of follow-up questions. Conservative estimates suggest this impacted a minority of incidents: only 3.5 % of youth ($n = 22$) reported two incidents that involved technology and at least one harassment incident that did not involve technology, and therefore these non-technology incidents were not captured in our estimates.

Additional limitations include the possibility that the youth's responses may have been influenced by social desirability and response sets. Some findings may be influenced by unmeasured dimensions, such as a greater willingness among some respondents to disclose personal experiences. Furthermore, the measure of distress at the incident level was limited compared to standard trauma measures. Finally, we chose to use a significance cut-off level of $p < .10$, as opposed to a more conservative $p < .05$ level, which means that for analyses found to be significant at $p < .10$, there is a greater chance that we falsely rejected the null hypothesis. Future research will need to verify the relationship patterns that were found in this study.

Conclusions

Peer harassment, aggression and bullying are among the most common victimization experiences for youth and adolescents, negatively affecting healthy emotional, social and academic developmental trajectories. Improving prevention and intervention strategies is crucial for optimizing the safety and well-being of youth. Helping youth develop better bystander and response skills is a very promising strategy, but peer harassment and aggression experiences

vary widely, and the reactions of victims and other involved youth are complex. We found, in contrast to findings in previous literature, that supportive reactions by bystanders and peers are common, although it is not clear how effective they are. Negative bystander behaviors, although less common, were highly distressing, and increased in victimization incidents with other upsetting elements. Youth also tell many others about the victimization experiences, and, while in many cases telling an adult helped the situation, our data indicate there is room for improvement. To improve bullying prevention efforts, we encourage the development of prevention strategies that target educational messaging and skill-building to all youth and adults who might witness or hear about a broad range of youth victimization experiences.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflicts of interest The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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