

# Cyberbullying and Indigenous Australians: A summary

## WHAT IS CYBERBULLYING AND WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

The term cyberbullying, first coined in 2000 in Canada, describes any aggressive behaviour that occurs on new digital technology platforms, particularly mobile phones and Internet-capable computers. Research estimates suggest that around around 20 per cent of young Australians aged 8–17 years (almost half a million people) experienced cyberbullying in 2013, with most international studies revealing victimisation rates among young people at between 6 to 40 per cent.

Cyberbullying is associated with a range of 'internal' mental health and wellbeing issues, including emotional distress, fear and shame. It is also strongly correlated with a range of negative social and health outcomes for victims and perpetrators alike, including school drop-out and absenteeism, alcohol and drug misuse, anxiety and depression. Most worryingly, there is an increasingly well-established link between cyberbullying and both suicide ideation and actualisation.

## HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM TRADITIONAL BULLYING?

Cyberbullying has the potential for a much wider *audience*, as a humiliating story can now be shared with an entire school year group, or a bullying encounter filmed and uploaded on social media where it can potentially be seen by millions of viewers again and again. Written words, images and video have been found to have a different interpersonal and emotional *power*, so receiving intimidating and violent videos (rather than being verbally threatened) can significantly amplify the affective impact of a threat. With cyberbullying, there is less opportunity to *escape* from victimisation, so a person can potentially be bullied at any time and in any place, including previously 'safe' spaces such as the family home. It can also be perpetrated *anonymously* on several digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, which can create psychological trauma in victims as anyone could be their bully. As cyberbullying is not always immediate, bullies rarely see the impact of their behaviour on victims thereby precluding the possibility of empathetic responses.

## HOW DO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES EXPERIENCE CYBERBULLYING?

Current research on cyberbullying tends to erase social and cultural difference altogether, focusing mainly on white, urban populations, differentiating students only by age and (binary) gender. But research from the social sciences has shown that Internet technologies such as social media are often experienced *differently* by Indigenous peoples, so we cannot assume cyberbullying occurs at the same rate, for the same reasons, and with the same impacts as for non-Indigenous people. In fact, some research even suggests they experience it at higher rates than non-Indigenous populations. As such, cyberbullying should be understood as a *cultural* phenomenon that occurs within a particular *political* context.

## CULTURAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Our review of the literature suggests that we need to consider cyberbullying as something that occurs within and across *families, clans* and *communities* rather than just to individuals. Moreover, there are specific cultures of *conflict* that influence what does and what does not 'count' as cyberbullying. For many Indigenous communities, conflict is often considered an important component of social relations and thus not always negative; alternatively, some behaviours that might not be considered 'bullying' by non-Indigenous researchers could in fact be seen as highly offensive and aggressive by Indigenous people. Research that assumes what constitutes bullying is either obvious or always the same everywhere overlooks the cultural specificities of conflict.

Understood as a systematic abuse of power, bullying is often supported by and motivated through racial prejudice, with rates of cyberbullying linked to the ongoing legacy of colonialism and extant disadvantage among Indigenous populations. By paying more attention to these factors, our review suggests we can build a better understanding of how cyberbullying is related to intergenerational trauma, the splintering of families, and various forms of economic, political and social disadvantage.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

This Summary is based on a full review by Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, *Cyberbullying and Indigenous Australians: A Review of the Literature*. It is the result of a collaborative research project with Deborah Munro and the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales, and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, both of which have supported and funded this research on cyberbullying and Indigenous youth.

## WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT CYBERBULLYING IN INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS?

It is clear that we need a better understanding of the cultural specificities of conflict, bullying and violence, and how these intersect with existing and emerging digital technologies. To develop a richer, more complete picture, we would benefit from national-scale, qualitative research that specifically addresses the issue of cyberbullying towards and among Indigenous populations.

It is important to recognise, too, that Indigenous populations are not homogeneous. Thus, future research could take a more intersectional approach by exploring how Indigenous peoples' experiences of cyberbullying intersect with other social identities, including sexual and gender minorities, differently abled populations, socio-economic status or geographic variables (including city, suburban, rural and remote locations).

If we are to mitigate the negative consequences of cyberbullying in Indigenous populations more effectively, we need:

- to understand that Indigenous groups engage with social media in culturally specific ways and develop appropriate educational programming
- to emphasise the strength of culture, a unique preventative factor in Indigenous communities
- to recognise that traditional pathways (such as gerontocratic authority or leadership by Elders) can be more appropriate and effective than those most often used among mainstream populations (such as through schools or the police).

A PDF of this summary and of the full review are available at:

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