

FIVE THINGS | to Know about Bullying

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Concern about youth bullying continues to grow. Although definitions of bullying vary, bullying [commonly means](#) aggressive behavior in the context of a power imbalance that is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Approximately [28 percent of youth](#) ages 12 to 18 report having been bullied in the past year. Unfortunately, many common assumptions about bullying are not supported by research. Below we debunk five common misassumptions about bullying, and present what we actually know.



1

Bullying is not an epidemic.

Many recent news reports about bullying have labeled the issue a "growing epidemic." In reality, rates of bullying have been relatively stable on both of the nationally-representative surveys collected by the federal government. According to the [School Crime Supplement](#), rates of bullying for 12- to 18-year-old students have remained between 28 to 30 percent of youth from 2005 through 2011 (the most recently-reported data). Information from the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey](#) shows rates of bullying for students in grades nine to twelve were 20 percent for each of the collections in 2009, 2011, and 2013. While bullying is not going up, it is also not going down. A significant percentage of students are being bullied, suggesting that ongoing prevention efforts are not lowering the overall rate of youth reporting being bullied.

2

Traditional forms of bullying remain more prevalent than cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying, or bullying through electronic communications, often dominates the current discourse on bullying, making it seem like it is the most common form of bullying. In reality, rates of cyberbullying are consistently lower than traditional forms of bullying, as reported in the [School Crime Supplement](#) (9 percent) and the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey](#) (16 percent). [Emerging research](#) also suggests that cyberbullying is not a separate form of bullying, but rather a separate context in which the same behaviors occur. The vast majority of those who are cyberbullied are also bullied in traditional forms.



Bullying alone does not cause suicide.

Much of the recent attention to bullying has centered on several tragic cases of bullying-related youth suicides. Though bullying was likely a factor in each of these suicides, bullying was likely [not the only factor](#). Youth suicide is often [multidimensional](#) and it is not possible to isolate any single cause. Both those who are bullied as well as [those who bully others](#) are at risk for suicide, with the highest risk for those who [engage in both behaviors](#). However, the [vast majority of youth who are bullied](#) do not consider or attempt suicide, and the [vast majority of reported youth suicides](#) do not list bullying as a precipitating factor. Suggesting that bullying and suicide are casually linked, and publicizing youth who have died by suicide, may actually lead vulnerable youth to consider suicide, a process called [contagion](#). It is important for all youth who are thinking about suicide to get help. If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, please call the [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (1-800-273-TALK).



All youth involved in bullying are affected.

Our concern about bullying typically focuses on youth who have been bullied. There is [substantial research](#) that shows that, indeed, these youth are more likely to become depressed or anxious, have [decreased academic achievement](#), and use alcohol or drugs. However, emerging research suggests that [those who bully others](#), as well as [those who witness bullying](#), are also at increased risk. It is therefore important to ensure that [all youth involved](#) in bullying are supported.



Criminalization will not solve bullying.

Several state and local legislatures have begun considering laws to make bullying and/or cyberbullying a crime. Such laws are [problematic](#) in several ways, and will likely do little to actually help youth who have been bullied or help correct the behavior of those who bully others. Instead, we must focus on prevention and intervention strategies that have been [shown to be effective](#), such as improving school climate, social and emotional learning, and restorative practices, which focus on repairing relationships and restoring a positive environment.

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