Cyberbullying & Bullying in Massachusetts:
Frequency & Motivations

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ABSTRACT

This brief reports on the major findings of the studies conducted in the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center during the years 2006 to 2008. Detailed analyses are omitted but general findings are displayed and explained. The data deals primarily with cyberbullying, but some data related to bullying behaviors is reported. The findings are separated by study. Two studies are reported upon here: a survey of 334 college freshman and a survey of 178 K-12 educators from public schools across the Commonwealth. A third study, of 75 pediatricians in Massachusetts, will be discussed under separate cover. The findings from the two studies are presented here separately.

STUDY #1: 334 FRESHMAN STUDENTS REGARDING THEIR EXPERIENCES OF CYBERBULLYING DURING HIGH SCHOOL

A. Frequency of Cyberbullying behaviors

Forty-two percent of students surveyed reported that they had been cyberbullied via Instant Messaging (see Figure 1). This number should be considered an *underestimate*, since this study only examined Instant Messaging as the means of cyberbullying, and we now know that cyberbullying occurs via several different methods (user-generated online content, online chatting, text messaging, etc.). Data is currently being gathered utilizing a broader definition of cyberbullying which includes methods other than messaging; however, messaging is clearly one of the most common vehicles for cyberbullying.

Of the 42% who reported victimization, 37% reported being victimized during high school and 8% reported that they were also or only victimized during College. One surprising finding of this study was that cyberbullying follows some students to college, and in some cases, cyberbullying emerges during college, a time when many assume that students are developmentally "past" bullying behaviors.[1]

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[1] Englander, E.K. (2008). Cyberbullying and Information Exposure: User-Generated Content in Post-Secondary Education. In *Campus Safety Best Practices Report*, Department of Higher Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts (O'Neill, D.; Fox, J.,

The finding that 42% of student report cyberbullying victimization is consistent with national research estimates.
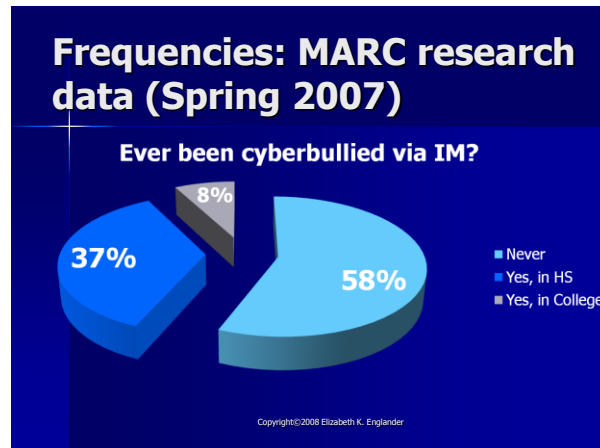

Figure 1. 42% of Massachusetts high school students are victims of Cyberbullying.

Female students were more likely to be victims of cyberbullying, relative to male students (Figure 2). This was only true for victimization during high school. Cyberbullying during college appeared to affect both genders equally.

Depue, R., and Englander, E.).

Have you ever been harassed, bullied, stalked, or threatened via instant messaging?
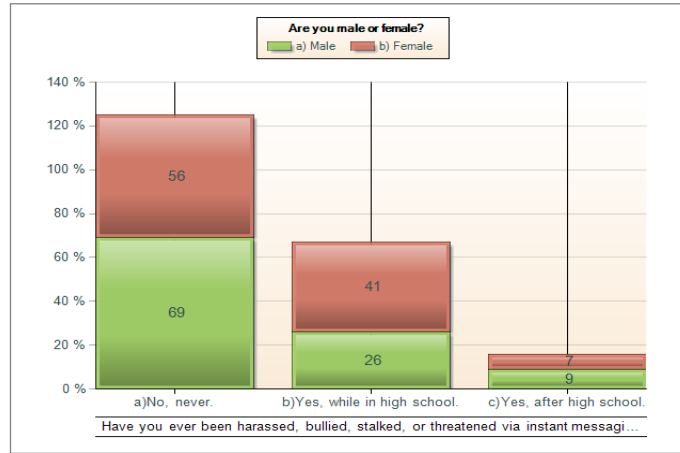
Figure 2. Males vs. females on victimization.

Figure 3 (below) shows the frequency with which students acknowledged being a cyberbully via Instant Messaging. (Again, IM is only one mechanism by which cyberbullying can occur so any data should be considered an overall underestimate of true frequency.) **Twenty-two percent of students admitted to cyberbullying someone else**; 20% admitted to doing so during high school and 4% admitted to cyberbullying during college (some students were in both categories, which accounts for the percentages).
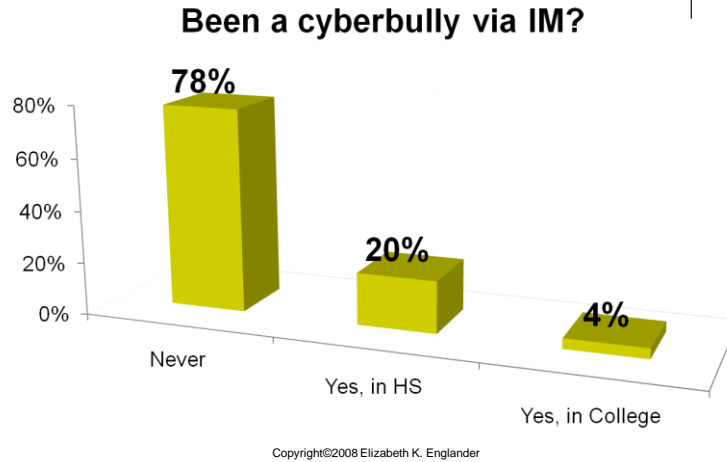
frequencies: marc research data

Been a cyberbully via IM?

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Figure 3. How frequently do students admit to being a cyberbully?

In contrast to cyberbullying *victimization*, where females report more frequently being a victim, males and females appear to admit to perpetrating cyberbullying at very similar rates (see Figure 4).

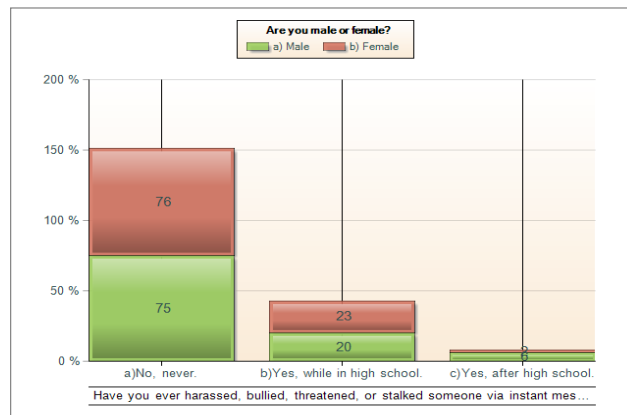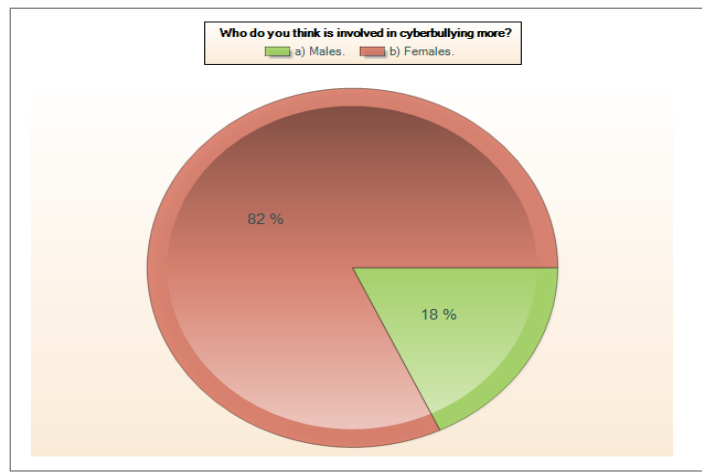Have you ever harassed, bullied, threatened, or stalked someone via instant messaging?

Figure 4. Cyberbullying by gender.

Consistent with the victimization data above – but not the perpetration data - both male and female students believe that females are more heavily involved in cyberbullying (see Figure below).

Who do you think is involved in cyberbullying more?

Students generally seemed to understand that cyberbullying might be dangerous, although this attitude was far from universal. Most students endorsed the opinion that cyberbullying can be dangerous if taken too far, but almost as many felt that for "most" people it's not a problem. This seems to reflect the attitude that cyberbullying is an issue that adults may fuss over but that rarely poses a serious risk – akin, perhaps, to dangers like drinking and driving or taking some recreational substances.
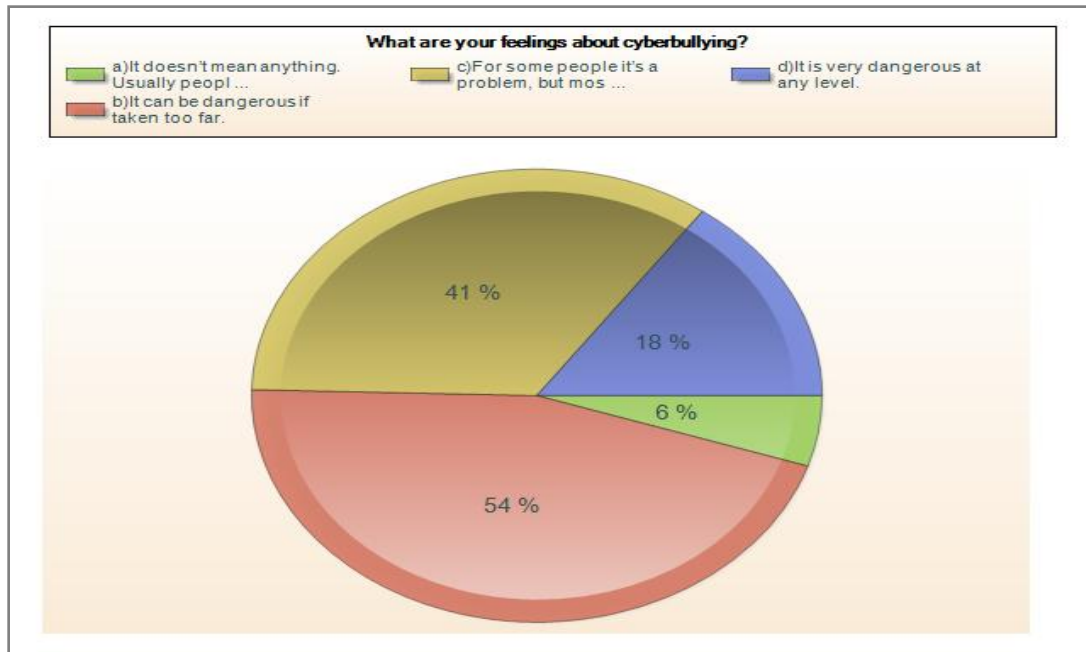
Figure 6. How serious a risk is cyberbullying?

How serious is bullying at school, and how many students are affected by it? In this study, 43% of students knew someone (or more than one person) who left school because of bullying. This does not mean that a high percentage of students actually left (many students could be aware of only one child leaving, for example). However, it implies that a student leaving school because of bullying could have a wide-ranging psychological impact on the remaining students. Similarly, 43% of students knew someone who had had to contact police because of severe bullying or cyberbullying.
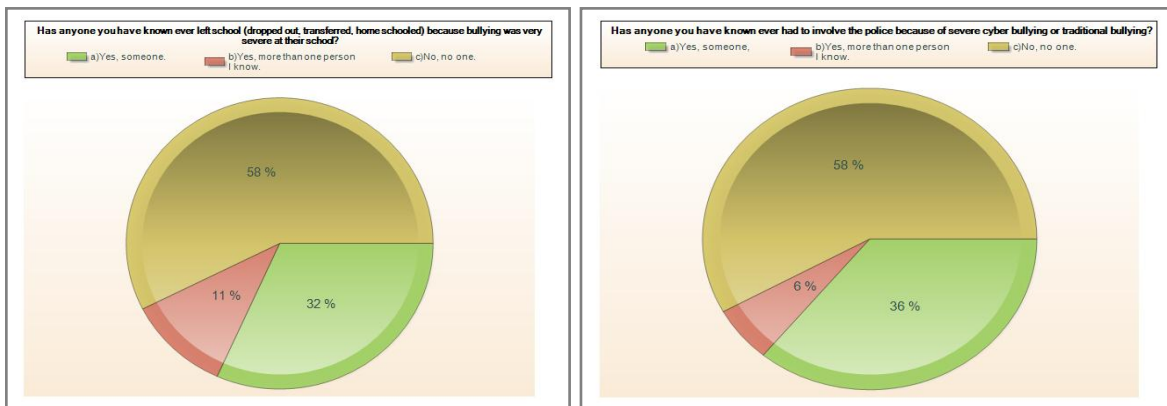
Figures 7-7a. Have you ever known someone who left school because of bullying? Contact police because of bullying?

We also asked students about their feelings about the interventions and education programs that adults offer them. Specifically, students generally felt that schools offered programs about cyberbullying but

that such programs were generally ineffective. When asked if schools do everything they can to stop cyberbullying, most students answered that they try; the second most popular choice was that schools simply do not do enough. **Only 8% of students felt that schools do "a lot" to prevent cyberbullying**.
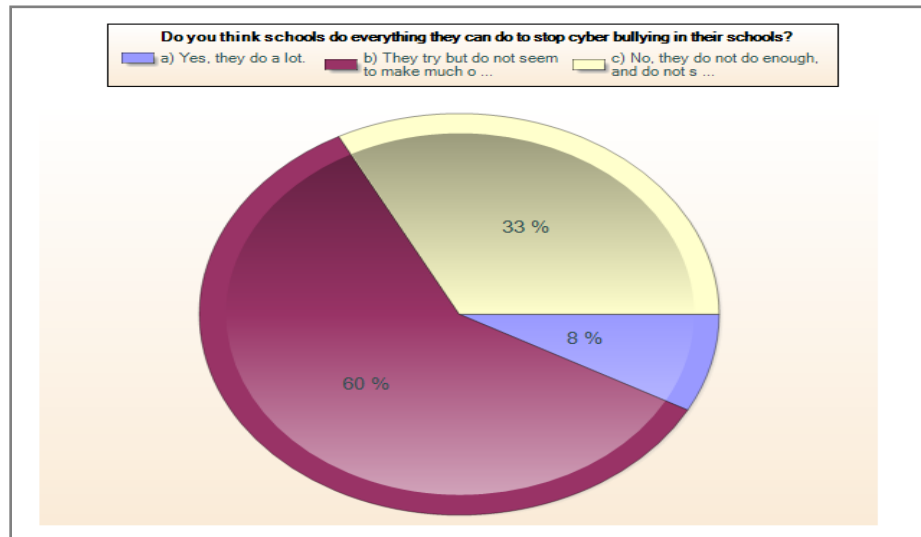

Figure 8. Do schools do enough to prevent cyberbullying?

B. Motivation for Cyberbullying Behaviors

Several questions dealt with students' opinions about the motivations behind cyberbullying. The first Figure shows the general distribution of responses regarding motives (see Figure).   Two interesting findings emerge here. First, students did not seem to believe that cyberbullies were students who, denied electronic bullying, would merely find another way to bully. Only 19% of students endorsed this item, which is consistent with observations in the field that suggest that **access to electronic communication devices, particularly access to messaging and user-generated web content, draws students into bullying who would otherwise not choose to bully**. The second finding of interest is the general pattern of answers, which suggests that the most important characteristic of electronic bullying that appeals to cyberbullies is the anonymity and the low probability of detection and punishment by adult figures. This, too, is consistent with qualitative observations in the field.

Why do you think people choose to bully using instant messaging, blogs, or cell phones?
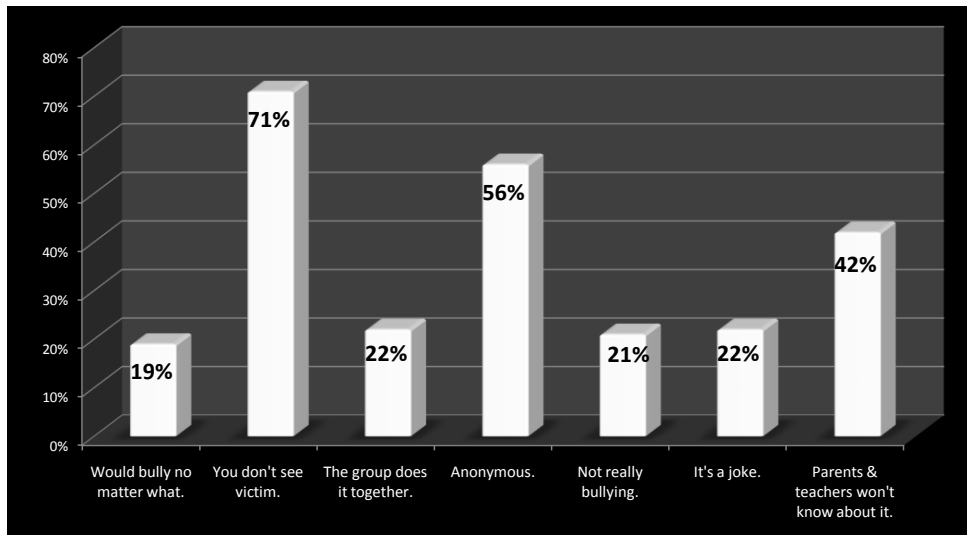

Figure 9. Motivations for cyberbullying.

Another set of questions was addressed specifically to those students who identified themselves as cyberbullies. The Figure (below) shows the motivations that students assign to their own electronic bullying behaviors.   While in general young people believe that anonymity is the major draw of cyberbullying, **cyberbullies themselves identify their own anger and desire for revenge as the major *immediate* motive for engaging in cyberbullying** (Figure below). A second motive is identified by students who report that they engage in cyberbullying "as a joke." It is difficult to interpret this answer with precision. While some students, in all probability, did behave electronically in a manner that they believed to be humorous, it is likely that others endorsed this answer in a defensive manner, i.e., they understood at the time that their behaviors were likely to be hurtful but find a callous answer to be the one that is most likely to enhance their status or appearance.
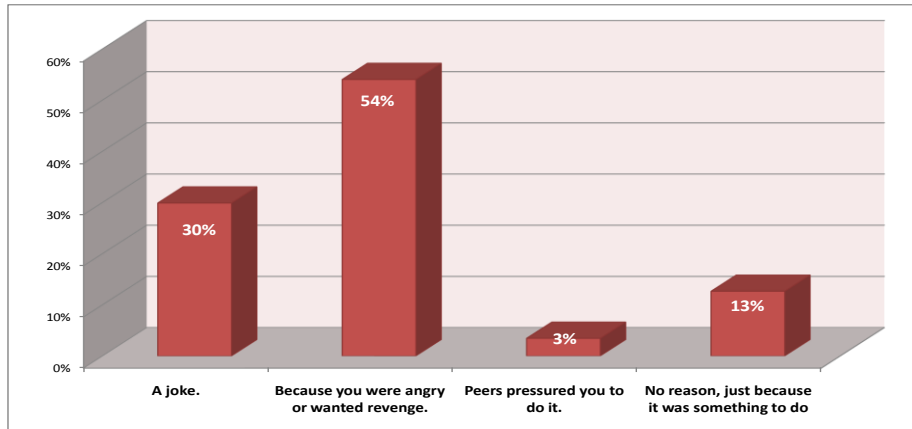
Why did you cyberbully?

Figure 10. Cyberbullies report their immediate motives.

As with victimization rates, males and females did differ somewhat on their rationale for their electronic bullying (Figures below). Among males, the predominant reason endorsed was "as a joke", although "because you were angry or wanted revenge" was a close second (44% versus 38%). Among females, "because you were angry or wanted revenge" was clearly the most common reason endorsed, with many fewer females reporting that they cyberbullied "as a joke."
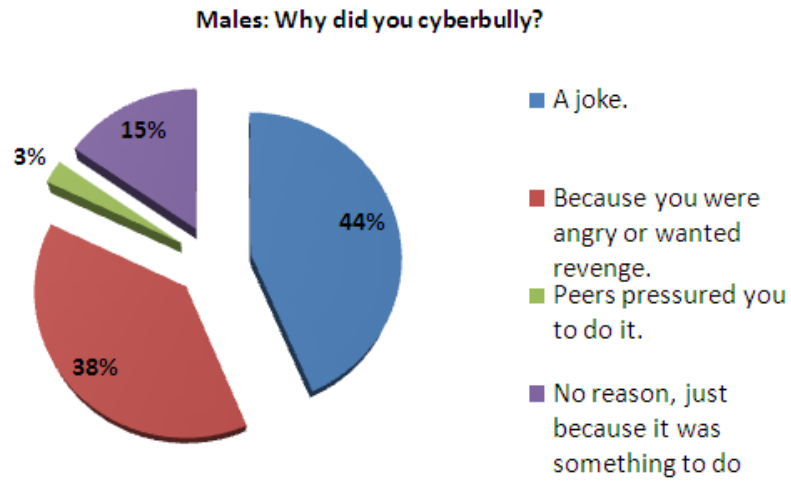
Males: Why did you cyberbully?

Males: Why did you cyberbully?

- A joke.
- Because you were angry or wanted revenge.
- Peers pressured you to do it.
- No reason, just because it was something to do

44%
38%
3%
15%

Figure 11. Male students' rationale for cyberbullying.

Females: why did you cyberbully?

- A joke.
- Because you were angry or wanted revenge.
- Peers pressured you to do it.
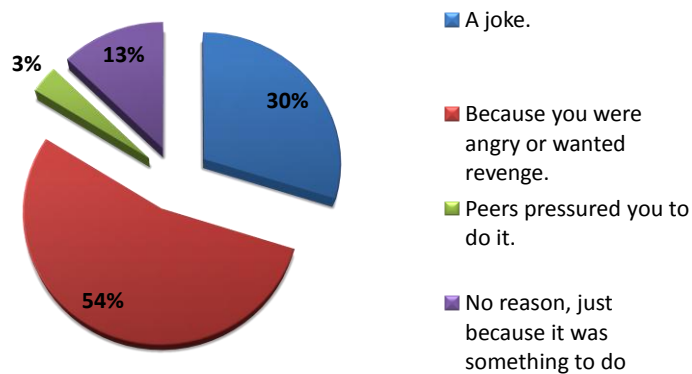- No reason, just because it was something to do

30%
54%
3%
13%

Figure 12. Females students' rationale for cyberbullying.

<u>SUMMARY</u>

Approximately 4.2 out of every 10 students surveyed as college freshman between fall 2006 and spring 2008 reported that they have been victims of cyberbullying. Most students reported being victims during high school, but a small percentage reported that the victimization began or continued to occur into College. Females were more likely to be victims but the genders reported being cyberbullies at approximately equal rates. Twenty-two percent of students admitted to being a cyberbully. All students felt that females were more likely to be involved in cyberbullying in general, although our data only supported that belief for victimization. Generally, students acknowledged that cyberbullying was potentially serious but felt that it usually wasn't. Regarding bullying at school, almost half of students knew someone who had left school and almost half knew someone who had contacted the police because of severe bullying.

Regarding motivations, students felt that the anonymity of the Internet was a major reason why bullying occurs online, but the immediate motive for cyberbullying tended to differ between genders. Females were decidedly more likely to cyberbully when angry or out of a desire for revenge, whereas males were about equally likely to attribute their cyberbullying to "joking" or because of anger. The findings on frequency are consistent with other national estimates of cyberbullying, and the data on motivation is particularly useful in the field when educating students about cyberbullying. It offers guidance about what how anti-cyberbullying curricula need to be focused.

SURVEY #2: 178 K-12 EDUCATORS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center delivers comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying services to Massachusetts schools at no cost, but one condition of our work in a school or in a district is the willingness of educators to participate in our research when we request a few minutes of their time. The data reported on here is the result of the survey of 178 educators in public schools across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that we conducted between October 2007 and June 2008.

The first item reported here deals with the estimated frequency of bullying, from the educators' point of view. The item asks educators how frequently bullying is reported, then points out that it is well understood that bullying is an *underreported* behavior. Educators are then asked how frequently they would estimate bullying "really" occurs. Figure 9 shows their answers. **Most educators estimated that bullying occurs in their school "several times each day."** Without a doubt, this reflects a high level of frequency.

Massachusetts Data, 2007-08
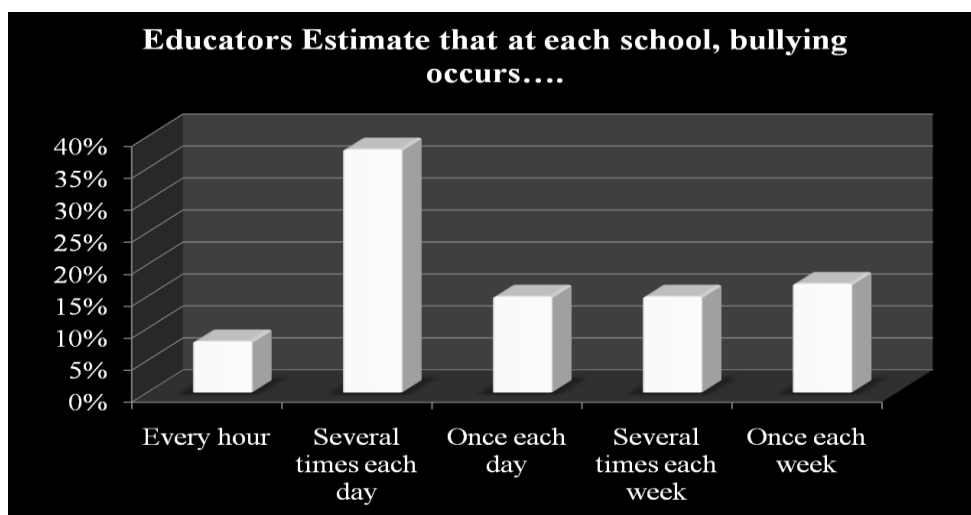
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Figure 13. How often do educators estimate bullying *really* occurs?

In the field, students report that many, if not most, bullying that occurs in middle or high school has an online component. In contrast, educators usually estimated that only 25% of bullying cases have an online component, with their second choice being 50% of cases (see Figure 10). The dominance of 25%

as a choice may reflect the fact that some of the educators in the survey work in elementary schools (although approximately two-thirds of educators surveyed work in middle or high schools).
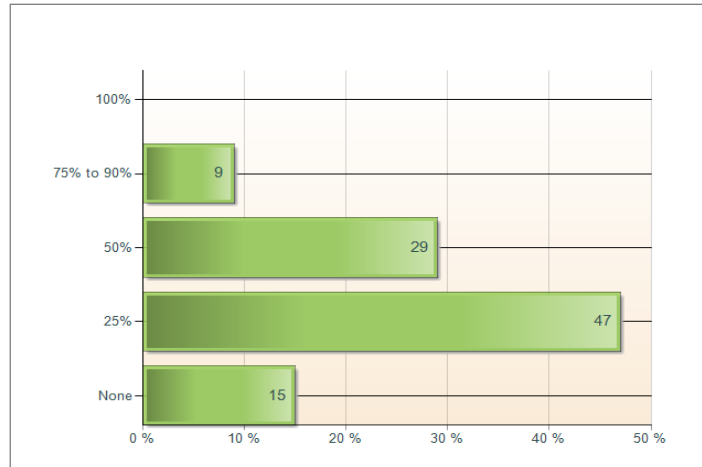

Figure 14. What percentage of bullying cases have an online component, according to educators?

We also queried Massachusetts educators about the specific issues that, in their experience, children tend to bully each other over. In addition to the issues listed in Figure 11 (below), our fieldwork has since revealed to us that children with special needs are frequently particular targets of bullies. In future research we intend to investigate that. For the present question, we asked educators to indicate all of the issues that they see as "bullying" issues in their school. **Educators felt that the issues that bullies most commonly utilize to choose their targets were "physical appearance" and "popularity/social status."**

In your experience, what are the issues that children bully each other over?
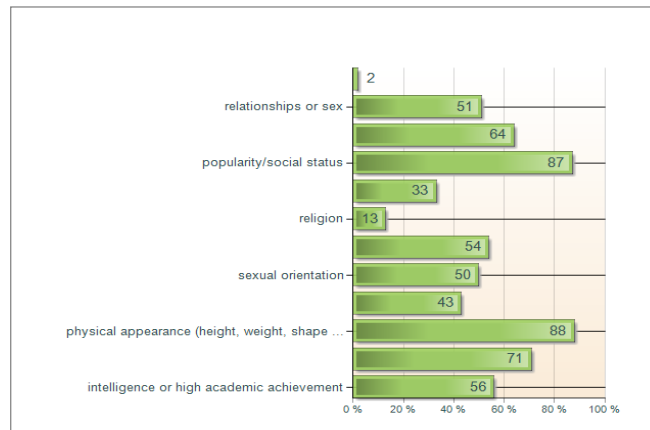

Figure 15. Issues children bully each other over.

SUMMARY

178 educators in Massachusetts were surveyed as part of the ongoing research at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center. Interesting findings included the following: educators most commonly estimated that bullying occurs several times every day, a frequency estimate which is much higher than most conventional estimates. In addition, educators tend to estimate that bullying incidences have online components 25% of the time, with 50% of the time being the second most common estimate. This is in some contrast to anecdotal data from fieldwork with students, who estimate that bullying incidences are interrelated with online bullying very frequently. Finally, when asked about the issues that bullies focus on when choosing victims, educators in this survey indicated that appearance and social status (or lack thereof) were the most commonly targeted issues.