

105 SHARE Hong Kong kids suffer in silence as cyberbullying contributes to youth suicide spike

Increasing online harassment and abuse contributing to alarming numbers of young people taking their own lives, experts say

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Since the beginning of February this year, at least six Hong Kong schoolchildren have taken their own lives. And on February 28, a 19-year-old Japanese man with a Hong Kong ID card was found dead in a suspected hanging at an apartment building in the Mid-Levels. Their deaths followed a worrying spike in the number of student suicides last year, again prompting concerns of a mental health crisis in Hong Kong, particularly among young people.

Academic pressure has long been cited as a major cause of depression among the city's youth. [The government has faced criticism for suggesting the education system has had no direct impact on student suicides, although it recently pledged to reduce students' workload.](#)

Psychologists have emphasised that mental illness amongst young people and, in the extreme, youth suicide, is rarely caused by one factor.

Professor Paul Yip Siu-fai, a University of Hong Kong academic who chairs the Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides, has said it is wrong to "simplify" the matter.

Other issues facing young people include family problems, social anxiety, body image problems and indeed, the negative influences of social media.

Although cyberbullying's prevalence and impact is difficult to quantify, a study by the Hong Kong Family Welfare Society in 2012 found that one in three students between Primary Four to secondary Three were victims of cyberbullying. And from its research, the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups estimates only one quarter of local cyberbullying victims will formally report the abuse.

Deborah Crouch, chief executive of the Samaritans in Hong Kong, which offers a free bilingual telephone service to those suffering from emotional distress, said Hong

Kong's long working hours meant many young people had limited contact with their parents on weekdays when they were feeling low.

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She said cyberbullying victims as young as 10 will experience a sense of “overwhelming loneliness” and may choose not to tell an adult because of the Chinese cultural tendency to want to “save face”.

“It is like a tunnel that you just cannot get out of,” she said. “[Victims] feel like they do not have anywhere to go. If you had people to talk to, you probably would not be calling us.”

The organisation does not ask callers for their age, but Crouch said the number of cyberbullying cases among its young callers appeared to be increasing.

Children aged 10 ‘victims of cyberbullying by classmates who share half naked pictures of them’, youth group warns

In 2015/16 the organisation took 30,899 calls; 12,369 from men and 7,360 from women. Some 11,170 calls were logged as being from silent callers. Crouch said cyberbullying could be a contributing factor to suicide, but said academic pressure was undoubtedly another major factor adversely affecting Hong Kong's youth.

She said young men particularly felt pressure to obtain a place at an Ivy League university, because Chinese culture emphasises they must eventually become the main breadwinner for their family.

“They feel absolutely useless if they cannot live up to those standards,” she said.

More vulnerable online

Meanwhile, more than half (52 per cent) of Hong Kong parents believe their children are more likely to be bullied online than in the playground, according to a new survey by online security company Norton by Symantec. The research also found 77 per cent of Hong Kong parents allow their children to access the internet before the age of 11.

The data was collated as part of the Norton Cyber Security Insights report, which surveyed 920 Hong Kong electronic device users aged over 18, of which 342 were parents. Investigators estimate only one in 10 victims will tell an adult about online abuse.

Kurt Wang, the company's senior sales engineer for Greater China Region Consumer Business, said children were increasingly facing threats from their peers beyond physical violence or face-to-face confrontation.

"Cyberbullying is a growing issue and parents are struggling to identify and respond to this threat," he said.

Sky Siu, executive director for local youth organisation KELY Support Group, said the immediacy and aggressive nature of cyberbullying had long-term "psychological effects" which could be as intensely felt as face-to-face bullying, and which was concerning given the recent rise in youth suicide in Hong Kong.

She said young people did not have the "coping methods" to deal with the abuse, and would often not seek help from an adult.

"It is not enough to educate people about being good netizens," she said. "We have to find ways to encourage young people to find strong friendship groups. Many victims tell us they have gone on to become bullies themselves, and we need to investigate why that is."

Fighting back

The city's public schools will generally have at least one social worker available to counsel students suffering from mental health issues. Some private schools may have greater staff resources.

But social media could be at the heart of the solution for cyberbullying, experts have concluded. In November last year, a report by the Committee on Suicide Prevention said social media could be used to highlight "online suicide prevention and intervention tools".

The report's authors recommended inviting representatives from Google and YouTube into schools to discuss the responsible use of social media.

As a result, the authors said, students could become empowered to report cases of cyberbullying and refrain from becoming perpetrators too.

"Students can act as gatekeepers to stop and report these undesirable behaviours," the report said.

Dr Parry Aftab, executive director of StopCyberbullying.org and an expert who advises Facebook how to combat the issue, will this year bring her Teen Angels programme to Hong Kong, starting at Yew Chung International School.

It aims to train students how to offer support to their peers if they experience cyberbullying.

Her organisation also plans to launch an anti-cyberbullying app, brainstormed by Hong Kong students, in May in the US, and in Hong Kong soon afterwards.

From her research, Dr Aftab estimates 50 per cent of young cyberbullies are also bullying their peers in the real world. She also suggests that while bullying in schools tends to see children targeting a member of the same gender, in the online world it is a more diverse picture,

with mixed gender groups coming together to cyberbully someone.

She said Hong Kong students had told her Whatsapp, Instagram and YouTube were the primary platforms being used as cyberbullying tools.

She said sextortion was a particular type of cyberbullying which is growing problem globally.

“Real or morphed images, mostly of girls, are created and shared to destroy the reputation and hurt the target,” she said. “It takes minutes before a new technology is abused by tweens and teens. They are inventive.”

Dr Aftab said she felt particularly compelled to support Hong Kong victims of cyberbullying because they often suffered in silence due to parents being tied up with work commitments.

“They are connected 24/7,” she said. “They are taught to be kinder and more respectful in life, so they often have no outlet other than digital technology to let out steam and lash out. Reputations are crucial and any damage to reputations is very serious, more serious than in many places.”

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Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data Stephen Wong Kai-yi said the watchdog had seen an increase in information communication technology-related complaints over the past five years. “Cyberbullying, being one of the major ICT-related disputes, is on the rise,” he said.

Some countries, such as Canada, have introduced legislation to combat cyberbullying, which gives police greater powers to seize electronic devices in cases where

they suspect someone has been harassing or attacking another individual online. But the moves have raised concerns over increasing restrictions on personal freedoms. Hong Kong currently has no legislation on cyberbullying.

Wong said the issue was addressed by various existing legislations, depending on the circumstances in which cyberbullying occurs, such as defamation and criminal intimidation and infringement of intellectual property.

“In view that cyberbullying is a complex societal issue and is not solely related to the sharing of personal data, the Privacy Commissioner maintains an open mind on the suggestion of introducing a specific legislation governing cyberbullying,” he said.

“Views of the public would certainly be one of the considerations for pursuing any suggestion for regulating by way of legislative measure, which is primarily the decision of the government policy bureau.”

Tell tale signs

- Child appears nervous when receiving a text, online message or email
- Change of habit: Begin to avoid their devices or use them excessively
- Has trouble sleeping, stomach aches, headaches and weight loss or gain
- Withdraws from friends and family
- Suddenly deletes their social media accounts

Why victims don't tell

- Believe it's too personal to talk about it

- Fear it could escalate the abuse
- The fear of punishment: Having their phone confiscated
- Feel ashamed and believe abuse is their fault
- Don't want their parents to worry about them
- Feel adults or other authority figures won't understand or take them seriously

What parents can do

- Gain relevant first-hand knowledge of online platforms in order to educate children about how to protect their personal data and privacy
- Explore online platforms that offer parental controls, allowing them to monitor or configure settings to protect children from undesirable contents or contacts
- Warn children that sharing information including photos online willingly or inadvertently means information can be accessed by members of the public
- Find suitable ways to engage with children in their online activities
- Discuss cyberbullying with children, and tell them they can seek advice from their parents
- Remind children not to rush to provide or share information online

What to do as a victim

- Children should seek help from parents or adults that they can trust
- For minor incidents of cyberbullying such as mean or nasty comments, the best response is no response
- If the messages persist, the best strategy is to block them
- Complain directly to the social network operator

- If the offending posts contain criminal elements, for example, criminal intimidation, you may report the matter to the police or seek legal advice to decide the appropriate recourse
- If the cyberbullying activities involve wrongful collection of personal data or misuse of personal data, you can lodge a complaint with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data

Anyone feeling emotionally distressed can call the Samaritans Hong Kong on 2896 0000