

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Cyber Bullying Kills**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the following white paper, cyber bullying will be defined and the long lasting imprint it has on the community will be examined. The information outlined is relevant because of the multitude of people and organizations that will be influenced due to the rapidly emerging issues that arise from the acts of cyber bullying. Law enforcement and educators should devote more time and effort to prevent cyber bullying in youth.

Amanda Todd, Phoebe Prince, and Tyler Clementi are all examples of youth suicide victims stemming directly from the newly introduced internet form of harassment. The lives of Sean Mulveyhill and Dharun Ravi are other instances that illustrate the pit falls associated with this crisis. These individuals, their roles, and outcomes are chronicled.

Cyber bullying not only costs the lives of those affected, it also has a costly financial burden using monies from proactive and/or reactive funding. This paper will define proactive and reactive funding and will address the preferred method. Taking preventative measures to cyber bullying will save lives, money, and careers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cyber bullying can kill careers, finances, relationships, and in most severe cases, it can lead to the death of people both physically and emotionally. In past times, adolescent bullying was often recognized as a form of face to face confrontation. For example, bullying would commonly take place in a schoolyard, lunch room, and/or playground. Technology is rapidly advancing and has become an important necessity in the daily lives of society. Due to the rapid development of technology, the concept of bullying has also evolved.

According to the National Crime Prevention Council, "Online bullying, called cyber bullying, happens when teens, use the Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person" (as cited by Myers, McCaw, & Hemphill, 2011, p. 3). Myers et al. (2011) also explained cyber bullying as when an individual is "tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed, or otherwise targeted" by another individual (p. 3). There are several social media platforms where images and messages are exchanged to include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Kik, and Snapchat. Before the advancement of technology, rumors and details associated with the normal form of bullying would be spread by word of mouth. Typically in most bullying situations of the past, the bullying act was only witnessed and observed by individuals that were present during the time of the event. When information is exchanged through social media, it has the capability of spreading rapidly and reaching to people world wide. Individuals can witness and observe acts of cyber bullying without being present at the time of the event, and without speaking to anyone. A survey conducted by Patchin & Hinduja (2015) collected

data from more than 15,000 of middle and high school students. The data revealed that between May 2007 to February 2015, an average of 26.3% of students experienced cyber bullying at some point in their life. More notably, in May 2007 18.8% students experienced cyber bullying and by February 2015 it had elevated to 34.0% (Patchin & Hinjua, 2015). This study shows that cyber bullying cases are on the rise.

Cyber bullying affects the community as a whole and is a threat that will continue to flourish unless action is taken. Prevention mechanisms can save lives, careers and help suppress acts of violence to include suicides. It can also educate, inspire, and create a sense of responsibility in youth. Law enforcement and educators should devote more time and effort to prevent cyber bullying in youth.

## **POSITION**

Suicides have been on the rise amongst youth. Many are affected from the aftermath of these actions to include families, law enforcement and educators. In early literature and studies, suicides were rarely discussed since it occurred on rare occasions. Recently, there have been an immense amount of worldwide events that depict suicides among youth becoming a common part of the current generation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), suicide amongst youth between the age of 10 and 24 is the third leading cause of death. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also documented that suicide related behavior can be linked to bullying. The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2014) stated, individuals involved in suicide behavior frequently experience “overwhelming feelings of helplessness and hopelessness” (p. 3).

One well-known case that is known nationwide is the story of Amanda Todd. Her case is an example of how bullying can contribute to someone feeling helpless and hopeless. Amanda Todd was a 15-year-old teenager who committed suicide on October 10, 2012 at her home in Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada (Grenoble, 2012). Todd posted a *YouTube* video prior to her death, chronicling the events that led up to her taking her life. In the video, Todd used flash cards to tell her story. She explained that while she was in the seventh grade she communicated with others over the internet. During that time frame, she received compliments on her physical appearance and she was ultimately convinced to flash her boobs to someone online. A year later she was contacted on Facebook by a male telling her to “put on a show” for him or he would expose her “boobs” to the public (Suicide Prevention, 2012). During Christmas break Todd was later contacted by the police and informed that the exposing photo was sent to multiple people. She experienced anxiety, depression and panic disorder as a result. Todd and her family moved a year later and she was contacted by that male again. He had Todd's topless image as his profile image.

Amanda changed schools again as a result of harassment from her new classmates that were made aware of the image. She later “hooked up” with an old male friend, while he was dating another female (Suicide Prevention, 2012). The girlfriend of Todd's male friend went to Todd's school and physically assaulted Todd. After that event, Todd attempted suicide by drinking bleach. Amanda did not die at that point and she was taken to the hospital. The online harassment continued which included comments wishing that she would just die. Photos of bleach bottles were also posted. One of the last flash cards that Amanda displayed read “I have nobody I need

someone” (Suicide Prevention, 2012). Based on the information on the flash cards, Todd experienced feelings of helplessness and hopelessness which are traits associated with bullying according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2014). An investigation by the British Columbia Coroners Service showed that Todd’s death was a result of suicide. In Todd’s instance, several people harassed, embarrassed and tormented her. Cyber bullying had a significant impact on the life of Amanda Todd and her family (Spear, 2012). It can be concluded that cyber bullying killed Amanda Todd.

Cyber bullying prevention will educate, inspire and create a sense of responsibility in youth. Adolescents are infamously known for acting without spending time contemplating the end result or consequences. Others may take action without understanding the seriousness of the violations associated. Adults are responsible for the decisions and actions that are made on a daily basis. Prior to adulthood, the adolescent years involve the learning experiences and lessons in preparation for the future. Educating the youth and then holding them responsible, with regard to cyber bullying, will help serve as a deterrent in the future.

Recent cases have shown that youth committing the act of cyber bullying are being held responsible with criminal and civil liability. The death of Phoebe Prince initiated criminal charges for those involved in bullying and cyber bullying. Phoebe Prince was a 15-year-old female that lived and attended school in South Hadley, Massachusetts (Contrada, 2012; Eckholm & Zezima, 2010; Thompson, 2013). She became involved with two males, Austin Renaud and Sean Mulveyhill. The males had girlfriends whom later found out about Prince. She then became the target of face to

face bullying and cyber bullying because of her involvement with Renaud and Mulveyhill.

On January 14, 2010, Prince's deceased body was found, hanging from the stairwell of her home, by her 12-year-old sister. Prince's death was ruled a suicide. The aftermath of the Prince's suicide led to those involved to be held responsible. District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel indicted six students on felony charges in relation to Prince's death (Contrada, 2012; Eckholm & Zezima, 2010; Thompson, 2013). Ultimately five of the six individuals were placed on probation and several others were required to do community service.

In essence, Prince was not the only one who lost her life as a result of this situation. Mulveyhill was denied a football scholarship after the incident occurred (Thompson, 2013). Also, the students were later removed from that school. The students involved lost a sense of normalcy. The future careers of those involved may be in jeopardy. Employers, schools, and society in general will use background information on an individual to decide acceptance into an institution. Individuals that have negative documentation on their backgrounds are commonly known to have a higher rate of difficulty when seeking employment opportunities. The lives of the students that were involved will forever be affected. The suspects involved in Prince's case are held responsible for their actions. Phoebe Prince's case is an example of how the actions of a bully can alter more than the life of the victim.

Educating the youth can inform the students of the consequences of their actions. With adolescents being often influenced by the actions of others they can also inspire others to have a positive influence and persuade others not to commit the



actions of cyber bullying. After Prince's death, a Facebook group created a page with the headline, "Expel the three girls who caused Phoebe Prince to commit suicide" (Thompson, 2013, p. 153).

Tyler Clementi was considered a talented young man with a bright future. The summer after Clementi graduated high school, he revealed to several individuals that he was gay (Tyler Clementi Foundation, n.d.). Tyler then attended Rutgers University and became a member of the orchestra. Clementi also was the subject of cyber bullying. Clementi's roommate set up a webcam and recorded Clementi involved in an intimate act and posted it online for several to view (Thompson, 2013; Tyler Clementi Foundation, n.d.). Clementi was made aware of the situation. On September 22, 2010, Clementi committed suicide by jumping off of the George Washington Bridge (Thompson, 2013; Tyler Clementi Foundation, n.d.). He was eighteen years old at the time of his death (Tyler Clementi Foundation, n.d.). Dharun Ravi was Clementi's roommate. Ravi was responsible for recording Clementi's intimate encounter and sharing it via social media.

On May 21, 2012, Ravi was sentenced to 30 days in jail, three years' probation, 300 hours of community service, and a \$10,000 fine (Koenigs, Smith & Ng, 2012). Ravi was held responsible for his actions. Prevention methods and education on this topic may have caused this situation to be avoided. It can be said that because of their actions, cyber bullying has killed the future careers of the individuals involved in the cases involving Phoebe Prince and Tyler Clementi. Since Clementi's death, the family of Tyler Clementi has created a website in his honor. That site serves as a worldwide tool to inform others of Tyler's situation and to create positive change in ending all forms

of bullying. The website also serves as a tool for other people to share their story and to take a pledge against the different forms of bullying. The site also offers solutions and resources to help solve some of the problems and experiences of others. Members of the Tyler Clementi Foundation also travel the world to raise awareness of the life of Tyler Clementi and effects of cyber bullying (Tyler Clementi Foundation, n.d.). The parents of Tyler Clementi used the tragic death of their son as an opportunity to inspire change in others.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Budget may be a concern for the parties involved in the prevention of cyber bullying. Time, effort, and energy will be required when it comes to the prevention of cyber bullying. It can be costly if an individual connected to law enforcement or the education system devotes time towards the monitoring and preventing cyber bullying. In most cases, these employees will be receiving compensation and their salaries, while they are investing time to the prevention of the cause. Some may argue that the fees associated with dedicating an employee to the prevention aspect may become costly. Cyber bullying will cost whether the money is spent during prevention periods or spent during the aftermath of an incident.

To illustrate, in a suicidal case, police are required to respond to the scene of the incident whether to negotiate a suicidal subject to stand down, or to investigate a suicidal death. Law enforcement personnel involved with the scene requires the time and compensation, which cost funds i.e. salaries, to respond to an event. Educators are open to civil litigation involving cyber bullying which will require the spending of funds also. Timothy and Barbara Burdette filed a \$1 million dollar lawsuit against the

San Diego Unified School District in reference to their son, Matthew's, case of cyber bullying (CBS News, 2014). Matthew Burdette was kicked out of class for eating sunflower seeds. After he was kicked out of class, the teacher did not give him instructions on what to do. Matthew then went to a bathroom in the school. While Matthew was in the bathroom stall, another student recorded him masturbating. That student posted the video of Matthew on Vine and Snap Chat, which are both social media websites that can be viewed by others. Matthew was harassed and teased as a result of the video. Matthew ultimately committed suicide two weeks after the video was posted. Timothy and Barbara Burdette's lawsuit claimed that employees of the school district knew that Matthew was getting harassed and nothing was done about it (CBS News, 2014). Law enforcement is affected by this situation because officials are involved in the death investigations and court room security during trial.

In the earlier mentioned case involving Phoebe Prince, Prince's mother Anne O'Brien, reached a settlement for \$225,000 (Ng, 2011). The settlement was an agreement for Anne O'Brien not to sue in relation to the events surrounding her daughter's death. The cost accrued in response to cyber bullying can become expensive. The effort and time spent will cost whether it is spent on prevention or spent in reaction to a situation. If the funds are spent on prevention efforts it has the possibility of saving lives and saving money. Money spent during the prevention phase is better utilized as compared to post cyber bullying funds.

Some law enforcement employees and educators may argue that it is not their responsibility to monitor the social media actions of youth. It may also be argued that the parent or guardian should hold the sole responsibility. In some instances, the youth

community will have more communication with others outside the scope of their parent or guardian. Schools and parents must work cooperatively in the process of identifying, resolving, and preventing cyber bullying situations from arising (Trolley & Hanel, 2010).

Cyber bullying often spills over onto the school setting. Often times school administrators or law enforcement officers, will be made aware of situations prior to parents or guardians. Law enforcement officers often work inside the school grounds as resource officers. The duty of care obligation on teachers and principals where they are required to act as careful and prudent parents was developed more than 100 years ago, when schools were smaller and mainly residential schools (Shariff, 2009). Lawsuits may be pursued if neglect can be proven on behalf of educators or law enforcement. If these entities fail to act when notified of a case of cyber bullying, liability may become the responsibility of whoever failed to act.

In reference to Tyler Clementi's death, Patchin wrote that the "vast majority of cyber bullying incidents can and should be handled informally: with parents, schools, and others working together to address the problem before it rises to the level of a violation of criminal law" (as cited by Thompson, 2013, p. 152). Law enforcement officers and educators are often on the frontline and can be influential in change. As mentioned previously, the case of Timothy and Barbara Burdette against the San Diego Unified School District highlights the civil litigation filed because of the thought that the school district did not properly handle the situation. Cyber bullying prevention will be a combined team effort with law enforcement, educators, and guardians.

## RECOMMENDATION

Cyber bullying in the youth should be a focus of law enforcement personnel and educators. Cyber bullying has an impact on several different lives. There has been documentation of several individuals that have lost their lives from committing suicide as a result of feeling harassed and tormented. The careers of individuals have been lost or altered because of their involvement in cyber bullying. Careers have been lost by suicides, and by criminal and civil litigation. Cyber bullying can also cause a financial burden. Organizations and individuals may be obligated to spend funds from decisions made prior to an incident. Cyber bullying prevention is necessary because it will deter suicides and it will educate youth and establish a sense of responsibility for actions taken.

Budget may be a concern for organizations when it comes to dedicating resources to the cause. Employees involved will typically be compensated with pay for the time spent during the prevention period. Cyber bullying will require financial assets whether it is spent for prevention purposes or spent in response to a situation. If an individual commits suicide, law enforcement personnel will respond to the scene of the incident. Time and salaries will also be involved during the investigation period and during courtroom procedures. Lawsuits in response to an incident will require money to be spent for attorneys, settlements, and salaries of individuals required for court appearances. Some law enforcement personnel and educators may also argue that it is not their responsibility to monitor the social media actions of youth. Some may also argue that the responsibility falls onto the parent or guardian. Lawsuits have been initiated against law enforcement and educators for a failure to act. A failure to act

could have stemmed from the prior actions not being taken after notification has been made of a situation.

In the research of Amanda Todd, she identified her story and feelings as a result of the online harassment. She ultimately committed suicide because of the cyber bullying. Phoebe Prince also committed suicide as a result of online and face to face bullying. The six teens involved with bullying Prince were indicted on felony charges. The careers of the individuals involved suffered a consequence because that information was added to their permanent records and will forever be attached to them.

Law enforcement, educators and the community need to build a cooperating relationship to help suppress the issue of bullying. These entities should obtain training to reveal the different types of social media outlets and their use. The training should also focus on how to recognize the signs of an individual dealing with cyber bullying. The topic should be added to a school course curriculum or an awareness event in order to educate the youth. School districts should develop a policy in order to identify cyber bullying standards. The policy should address the response and punishment of such an incident. Law enforcement agencies should also build a policy on how to respond to the reports of an online harassment.

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