



The COVID-19 Pandemic Disrupted Both School Bullying and Cyberbullying

Evidence from Publicly Available Google Trends Online Search Data

Andrew Bacher-Hicks, Joshua Goodman, Jennifer Greif Green, Melissa K. Holt

POLICY ISSUE

Bullying is widespread and has tremendous social costs. One in five U.S. high school students report being bullied each school year and these students face greater risks of serious mental health challenges that extend into adulthood. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced most students into online learning contexts, many worried that cyberbullying would increase. In this research, the authors use data from Google internet searches to examine changing patterns in bullying-related internet searches as COVID-19 disrupted in-person schooling. They ask: “Has there been an increase in school bullying or cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

This study relies on publicly available data from Google Trends, which tracks the popularity of search terms over time. The authors begin their analysis by providing two pieces of evidence that internet searches for bullying are reasonable proxies for bullying behavior. First, the authors show that, prior to the pandemic, states with more bullying-related online searches also had higher student-reported rates of bullying, as measured in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Second, searches for bullying-related terms closely track with the school year calendar over time, with fewer searches for bullying-related terms during the summer months. Both pieces of evidence suggest searches for bullying-related terms at least partly reflect actual bullying behavior.

The authors then show that as COVID-19 caused a shift to remote learning in the spring of 2020, searches for bullying and cyberbullying **decreased by 30-40%** compared to pre-pandemic levels. This drop is sustained through the fall and winter of the 2020-2021 school year, though bullying searches began to increase toward pre-pandemic levels as schools gradually returned to in-person instruction.

Though bullying searches remained below pre-pandemic levels in the 2020-2021 school year, states with a higher fraction of **schools offering only virtual instruction also saw the most dramatic reduction in searches for bullying**. Conversely, states with higher rates of in-person instruction saw a relatively smaller decline. Fully reopening schools is associated with a 19% decline in bullying searches, while remaining fully remote is associated with a 42% decline relative to pre-pandemic levels.”

KEY FINDINGS

Bullying-related internet searches dropped dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compared to pre-pandemic levels, both school bullying and cyberbullying searches dropped substantially after schools closed in spring 2020:

✓ 35% School Bullying

✓ 30% Cyberbullying

In fall and winter of the 2020-2021 school year, bullying searches remained below pre-pandemic levels, but were relatively lower in areas offering only remote instruction:

✓ 42% Fully Remote

✓ 19% In-Person Option

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These results highlight how in-person interaction is an important mechanism underlying not only in-person school bullying, but also cyberbullying. As education leaders plan for a return to in-person school for the fall of 2021, these findings provide insights that could further reduce or mitigate student experience with and exposure to bullying.

First, the findings reinforce the complexity of the social experience of students before and during the pandemic. Recognizing that in-school factors contribute to students' overall health and well-being, these findings underscore the importance of considering how schools can support students' social development and peer relationships.

Second, it is worth noting that a return to in-person schooling did not lead to a full rebound of bullying searches to pre-pandemic levels. This may be in part due to the changed nature of in-person schooling during this time. In-person schooling was both substantially more structured than in years

prior and perhaps more attentive to student social and emotional well-being than ever before. Public health measures such as social distancing, mask wearing, and attempts to reduce mixing of students across different classrooms substantially restricted the number of interactions students might otherwise have experienced and increased the amount of adult supervision. Structured spaces and increased supervision likely minimized opportunities for bullying to occur. Additionally, the collective experience of the pandemic may have also increased school staff awareness, responsiveness, and proactive discussion around more supportive and inclusive classroom environments. Together, these changes to the school context in response to COVID-19 appear to hold important lessons for a post-pandemic approach to reducing bullying and its harmful long-term effects.

Finally, results from this research suggest a potential new tool for the surveillance of bullying in schools. By analyzing the search intensity of Google Trends data, the authors provide a

mechanism to see shifts in bullying in real time, as opposed to waiting for a snapshot experience typically captured by self-reported surveys. The approach detailed by the research team can be modified to study future changes, specific contexts, or additional search terms.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [StopBullying.gov](https://stopbullying.gov) provides information from various government agencies on what bullying and cyberbullying is, who is at risk, and how to prevent and respond to bullying.
- 2021 meta-analysis on *What works in anti-bullying programs*.
- [Social Adjustment & Bullying Prevention Laboratory](https://socialadjustment.org/) engages in research-based school partnerships to better understand and promote healthy social adjustment.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheellockpolicycenter.org.

OUR MISSION

The Wheelock Educational Policy Center (WEPC) conducts and disseminates rigorous, policy-relevant education research in partnership with local, state, and federal policymakers and stakeholders to improve educational opportunities and holistic outcomes for underserved students.

www.wheellockpolicycenter.org
wheellockpolicy@bu.edu



Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development
Wheelock Educational Policy Center

