Preventing Bullying and Cyberbullying:
Research-Based Policy Recommendations for Executive and Legislative Officials in 2017

Future First Lady Melania Trump has named cyberbullying as a key priority for her work in the White House. To accomplish this goal and help children and youth to "find a better way to talk to each other, to disagree with each other, [and] to respect each other," federal policymakers should support communities in addressing and preventing bullying and cyberbullying, on school grounds and elsewhere.

State of the research

Approximately 7 percent of students ages 12 to 18—around 1.7 million youth—reported being cyberbullied in 2013, according to nationally representative data collected by the federal School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (SCS-NCVS). A significantly higher percentage—22 percent, or 5.4 million students—reported experiencing more traditional forms of bullying such as being made fun of, pushed or tripped, or excluded from activities on purpose. The vast majority of youth being cyberbullied are also being bullied in person. An effective cyberbullying initiative, then, should address all bullying behaviors.

Although bullying is rarely the sole cause, bullying has been linked to suicidal ideations and behavior as well as violence and school shootings. Bullying affects not only those who are bullied but also those who engage in the behavior as well as those who witness it, with those who both bully and are bullied at the highest risk of negative outcomes.

State of the field

Despite recent efforts to prevent and reduce bullying, rates of bullying have remained relatively stable over the past decade. While bullying is not going up and is not an "epidemic," neither is it going

down significantly. New federal investment and leadership are needed to address three key gaps in the nation's bullying prevention efforts: (1) the lack of a consistent definition; (2) the focus on punitive responses instead of addressing the root causes, and; (3) the lack of effective bullying prevention programming. While progress has been made to address these gaps, they continue to complicate bullying prevention initiatives.

In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a uniform definition of bullying to guide data collection efforts. Since only a few federal data collections have adopted this definition, it remains difficult to compare reported rates and understand discrepancies. However, there

is currently no uniform definition to help federal officials to collect cyberbullying data, or help policymakers craft anti-bullying laws. At present, no two states use the same definition of bullying, resulting in inconsistent protections for students.

Today, all 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico have statutes or regulations to prevent bullying and cyberbullying, the majority of which following the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) recommendations in its 2010 memo, "Key Components of Bullying Prevention Laws and Policies." However, across the country, anti-bullying laws are becoming increasingly punitive, including potential criminal charges, which have serious implications for expanding students' risk of incarceration while injuring schools' and students' willingness to report bullying incidents and failing to addressing bullying behavior. Punitive laws are not effective at reducing bullying behavior in youth, and do nothing to mitigate the harm experienced by youth targeted by bullying.

Although many bullying prevention programs and strategies are available, evidence of their effectiveness is mixed, and most have never been rigorously evaluated. A recent ED study found that only 8 percent of prevention programming implemented by schools had strong evidence of efficacy and less than half of the schools that used evidence-based programs did so with fidelity. Recently, schools have also started implementing tools that track students' social media postings as a way to combat cyberbullying. Such strategies are also not evidence-based, are unlikely to prevent cyberbullying, and may be a waste of schools' valuable resources.

No single strategy will work for all schools and communities. To effectively address and prevent bullying, communities should engage in a coordinated effort to examine the issue within their own populations and provide evidence-based supports for both those engaged in bullying behavior as well as those being targeted. Furthermore, as youth look to adults' behavior for guidance, adults should model behaviors such as empathy and respect and limit their own use of bullying behaviors.

For a list of sources used to develop this brief, go to http://www.childtrends.org/research-based-policy-recommendations-2017/

Our recommendations

1. **Include cyberbullying as part of a broader approach to bullying prevention.** Strategies targeting cyberbullying alone without addressing the broader issue of bullying are unlikely to be effective. Similarly, monitoring students' social media accounts is likely to be an ineffective use of resources without additional efforts to encourage more civil behavior online and in-person.

2. **Support the development of evidence-based approaches through dedicated funding for research.** Research investments to support both program implementation and evaluation—including continued funding for the National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative—are necessary to expand the limited menu of evidence-based bullying prevention approaches. Such investments should also examine interventions, such as integrated student supports, for students who are targeted by bullying or witness it.

3. **Discourage approaches that lack evidentiary support, criminalize youth, or remove youth from school.** Research clearly shows that anti-bullying assemblies, speakers, and campaigns are not effective at preventing bullying, nor are zero-tolerance policies that remove students from school and do not address the underlying causes of bullying behavior. Consistent with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) directive to reduce disciplinary removals from the classroom, schools and communities should be encouraged to address bullying behaviors without criminalizing, suspending, or expelling youth. Such efforts will require dedicated technical assistance to schools and communities, building upon the work that ED's National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments provides around Title IV of ESSA.

4. **Maintain federal data collections on bullying and align them to the uniform definition of bullying.** The School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System provide the only nationally representative data on bullying and cyberbullying. Ensuring these measures use a consistent definition to monitor rates of bullying will give policymakers a more accurate indication of whether (and where) initiatives are successful. Schools should also be provided with guidance to consistently track incidents of bullying.