Young people need more support coping with online sexual harm

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Digital technologies and the internet have become a part of daily life for many young people in Canada and worldwide. While that increased

connectivity brings many benefits, it can also open youth up to online harm and abuse. It is important that meaningful supports are in place to protect young people from sexual harm.

In 2020, humanitarian organization Plan International [surveyed just over 14,000 young girls and women](#) aged 15–25 in 22 countries, including Canada. Fifty-eight percent of participants reported having personally experienced some form of online harassment, including sexual harassment.

People who have experienced these problems report [significant adverse effects](#) on their well-being, including [lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, stress](#) and even [attempts at self-harm](#).

Further, research has shown that rates of sexual harm have increased among people with one or multiple marginalized identities like race, [sexual orientation](#) or a disability.

Young people who [experience this kind of discrimination](#) can face a higher risk of significant mental health problems.

Despite the severity of these harms, much of Canadian education, social supports and laws do not provide young people with the tools and protection they want and need.

Parents, teachers, technology companies, civil society organizations and governments are grappling with how to support young people in these cases. So, where are we going wrong?

We need to use the right words

[Our research shows](#) that terms like "cyberbullying" no longer capture the scope of harms young people experience in digital spaces. Using this

term can downplay the seriousness of the issue because it evokes an idea of schoolyard teasing rather than some of the more serious forms of sexual harms that youth can experience.

These digital harms can include receiving unsolicited explicit images, sexual harassment, exploitative sexual extortion and non-consensual distribution of intimate images. Many of these behaviors fall outside of what the average person would imagine when they think of cyberbullying and require new terminology that accurately describes what youth are experiencing.

As a group of leading scholars studying the unique challenges of navigating relationships and sexual experiences online, we have adopted the term "technology-facilitated sexual violence" to describe the sexual harms young people experience in digital spaces.

Our website offers a hub of resources to help support young people and address technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Through our five-year research project, Digitally Informed Youth (DIY) Digital Safety, we will engage with young people and the adults who support them. This is the first research project in Canada to specifically examine technology-facilitated sexual violence among young people aged 13-18 years old. We aim to understand their challenges, how they cope and their ideas for solutions.

Our research has emphasized that tackling this problem requires acknowledging young people's integrated digital and physical lives and recognizing that technology as a tool can both facilitate harm and can be harnessed to combat such harm.

Lack of Canadian research

Educators and policymakers must understand the problem within the unique context of Canadian society. Although there is a growing amount of Canadian research on technology-facilitated sexual violence, most research on this topic has been conducted in countries like the United States or Australia.

Specifically, there is little research on what young people in Canada are experiencing online, what terminology we should use to identify these harms and what supports young people find effective. Additionally, some young people in Canada face challenges because they live in remote communities or have less access to supportive resources.

It is essential to have contextual evidence-based [research](#) so that educators can talk to young people about their rights, understand what behavior is harmful and know how young people should respond to abusive sexual behaviors online. Youth voices and perspectives must be included in this analysis.

Consistent and accessible support

As technology has evolved, the Canadian legal system has introduced laws to address sexual harms against young people and adults, such as criminal laws against [child pornography](#), [child luring](#), [voyeurism](#) and [non-consensual distribution of intimate images](#).

However, young people still receive [confusing messages](#) about how these laws apply to them and which sexual behaviors are harmful. For example, many young people receive inaccurate [victim-blaming messaging](#) about images they may take of their bodies.

Legal interventions may be an appropriate response in some of the most serious cases of technology-facilitated sexual violence, but [young people need more than legal measures](#). In reality, many are looking for various

forms of support from schools, friends, [family](#), non-profit organizations and victim-service organizations.

Currently, school curricula and policies across Canada address technology-facilitated sexual violence in various ways, and the approaches vary significantly among provinces and territories. In some regions, there is minimal or even no language related specifically to technology-facilitated [sexual violence](#) in the curricula and policies.

With technology being a consistent part of young people's lives, it is key that school policies and curricula are updated to address the realities of young people's increasingly digitized relationships.

To update school policies and curricula effectively, some researchers suggest promoting the concept of being good ["sexual citizens"](#) among young people. This means encouraging them to navigate their lives and relationships with a solid ethical and interpersonal foundation. This model shifts away from victim-blaming and abstinence-only messaging. Instead, it focuses on fostering healthy relationships and communication.

Motivating young people to think critically about online risks is an empowering approach. It helps them acknowledge the influence that stereotypes, inequalities and sexist double standards have in these discussions and how they impact individuals' access to power and resources.

Relying on legal scare tactics or surveillance methods by caregivers and tech companies [undermines trust between young people and the adults in their lives](#). It also raises concerns among youth about how platforms are using the data collected from them.

Instead, we need solutions based on trust and open dialog, and for parents, educators, [technology companies](#) and policymakers to engage

with [young people](#) as the first step to creating a culture shift.

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