Cyberbullying has become much more common, FAU professor says

By Jerome Burdi
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Mixing the teenage mind, text messaging and social media can be a recipe for dangerous miscues in the communication age, experts say.

A study released this month and coauthored by a Florida Atlantic University professor reveals the dangers of cyberbullying among teenagers and how a simple text message or Facebook post taken out of context can lead to violence.

South Florida school officials said they are aware of the growing cyberbullying problem and are educating students and parents.

As in any generation, teenagers use relationships as status symbols. But with text messages and social media, relationships are more about keeping tabs and less about giving space, said the FAU professor Sameer Hinduja, codirector of the Cyberbullying Research Center.

A generation ago, when people spoke face to face or on [telephone] landlines, there was less misunderstanding, he said.

“Online, all you’re left with is your interpretation of that text,” Hinduja said. “Are they flirting? Is he cheating?”

A generation ago, there was also a parental buffer, he said. Parents may have picked up the house phone and not liked someone calling their child all the time.

But now, a teen sends an average of 3,000 text messages a month, said Hinduja, who teaches criminology at FAU’s Jupiter campus.

He coauthored the study with Justin Patchin, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. It is available online at www.cyberbullying.us.

The study revealed that 85 percent of teenage boys and 92 percent of girls engage in psychological aggression with their dating partner. It also showed that 24 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls physically attack their partner.

“Privacy violations can occur as perpetrators check up on, monitor, and even stalk
their partners,” the study said. “There have also been incidents where aggressors utilize textual, audio, picture or video content stored on their cellphones or computers to blackmail, extort or otherwise manipulate their partner into saying or doing something against their will.”

Hinduja would not say which school district the study is based on.

Neither Broward nor Palm Beach County schools allow students to use cellphones in class. Officials say most cyberbullying takes place away from school grounds.

“There’s two to three times more cyberbullying than face-to-face bullying,” said Aimee Wood, a prevention specialist with the Broward public school district. “They don’t see a reaction, so there’s a lack of empathy. They just hit ‘send’ without thinking.”

Wood said about half of Broward’s schoolchildren have been cyberbullied.

“It continues to evolve,” she said, “As we get more advanced, so do children’s methods of abusing each other.”

It’s unclear how many students have been the victims of cyberbullies in Palm Beach County. But it happens, according to Kimberly Mazauskas, a violence-prevention coordinator for that county’s school district.

“The kids have a different opinion of what personal privacy is,” said Mazauskas. “Because they don’t see someone on the other line, they don’t feel that it’s the real world.”

Sun Sentinel staff researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.