

## **Bullying the Number One Issue for Teens**

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Most American Teens and twentysomethings say that bullying is the number one problem they face in their schools and communities—ahead of other social problems like drugs, crime, and racism, according to a new national survey by [TRU](#), a youth research firm.

Local college students—including a number of recent high school grads—agreed with their peers in the survey.

“I agree that bullying is really big—more with girls, because girls can get vicious,” said Lauren Alvarez, an 18-year-old freshman at [Johnson & Wales University](#) and a native of Pearl River, New York.

Of the more than half dozen college students interviewed by GoLocalProv, all—except one—agreed that bullying is a major problem for them or people they have known.

Nationwide, 64 percent of teens in the survey identified bullying as a problem in their schools and communities. The study noted that bullying is on the rise, thanks to social networking sites like Facebook and the popularity of texting. More than half, or 52 percent, of those surveyed knew a fellow teen that had been the target of hateful or offensive bullying online while a third said they had directly experienced it. The survey was based on responses from 4,000 teens as well as twentysomethings, ranging in age from 12 to 29.

### **Cyber Bullying on the Rise**

“Bullying, in one form or another, has been with us forever,” said Peter Picard, a researcher at TRU. “But the old image of a menacing crowd cornering a vulnerable victim behind the gym doesn’t really capture the essence of modern bullying.”

“Think of a networked army of anonymous mean spirits — armed with webcams, iPhones, and Twitter accounts — who subscribe to the theory, ‘no blood, no foul,’” Picard added. “They’re perfectly content to deliver virtual blows that appear to leave no bruise. Unfortunately, today’s attacks leave a much more harmful mark than that of yesterday’s locker-room harassment — one that the whole world can see.”

### **Virtual Bullying, Real-World Consequences**

Recent news has brought a sober reminder of the deadly, real-world effects of virtual bullying. Last month, an 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman committed suicide after his roommate captured video of him having a sexual encounter with another male student. In Rhode Island, the Johnson & Wales campus was rocked by a suicide of a gay student just last week—although university officials have not said whether bullying was a factor.

Students at Johnson & Wales mostly agreed that bullying is worse in high school—but they said it still continues in college. “It’s a carry-over, but I think it should soon ... get better,” one freshman said.

Some said gay students are a common target. “I think it’s more directed against gays and lesbians than anything else, really, because that’s where I’ve heard it from,” said Jillian Loomis, a 20-year-old sophomore from Killingly, Connecticut.

“It’s just sad,” she added.

One openly gay student said even teachers in high school sometimes join in on the bullying. Derek Welch, a sophomore from Cape Cod, said one teacher used a sexually derogatory term against him in the middle of class. “It was pretty devastating,” Welch recalled.

He declined to comment on the recent suicide on campus.

### **‘I was the bully’**

One senior recalled his direct experiences with bullying—but not as the victim. “I wasn’t bullied. I was the bully,” said Robert Castillo, of New Jersey.

Castillo told GoLocalProv he was under peer pressure to be the “cool kid” at the school. Keeping up his reputation, he said, meant putting down other kids who weren’t as cool as he was or “had no sense of style.”

He said he tried to conceal his bullying as humor. “I would cover—‘I’m joking’—but I was saying it directly to them,” Castillo said. “Really, I was being serious.” Looking back, he realizes what he did was wrong, after seeing those he bullied continue to struggle with their self-esteem.

### **One School’s Solution**

Bullying is a top concern not only among teens, but also among educators, according to Bailey Thaxton, a coordinator for diversity programs at [The Wheeler School](#) on the East Side of Providence. She said cyberbullying is an especially difficult problem to address. “We can have ... expectations on school property, but we can’t enforce that in cyberspace,” Thaxton said.

Some schools are responding by blocking access to Facebook, Twitter, and Google Chat in school. Wheeler, however, has taken a different tack, emphasizing positive reinforcement. Each year, the school selects a small group of “Peer Supporters” who act as role models for underclassmen and others in their class—stepping in to discourage bad behavior, like bullying.

“To have peers playing that role has a much stronger impact,” Thaxton said.