

Cyberbullying

Immediate action must be taken towards enforcing stronger cyberbullying laws in Australia.

By Catie Howison and Ahana Relan

Cyberbullying is an ongoing issue that is faced by youth around Australia. Cyberbullying is viewed as the use of digital technologies to harass, threaten, or humiliate individuals. Unlike normal bullying, cyberbullying can take place at anytime and anywhere, resulting in much easier access for perpetrators. As social media usage rises within young people it becomes a breeding ground for cyberbullying which leads to long lasting affects on victims. The government has tried enforcing laws to put an end to cyberbullying, however, we believe that stronger laws must be put in place to protect young people.

Reports show that a shocking 44% of young Australians have had a negative online experience in the last 6 months. That's almost 1 in every 2 people who have endured some form of cyberbullying in such a short period of time. Almost everywhere you look there's someone who has either faced cyberbullying or is currently enduring it. Cyberbullying affects victims both mentally and physically and often leaves long lasting effects. Effects of cyberbullying can range from self-harm, starvation, depression, anxiety, and much more. In many cases, it can lead to death in the form of suicide due to the constant harassment. In relation to youth in Australia, cyberbullying accounts for at least 3 suicides per week. In 2023, 298 young Australian's aged 18-24 took their own lives due to cyberbullying. These atrocious figures have rapidly risen over the years, indicating that current laws are not effective.

A prime example which highlights the tragic impacts of cyberbullying in Australia is Dolly Everett's inspirational yet sad story. Dolly Everett was a 14-year-old girl who lived in the Northern Territory and attended Katherine High School where she endured severe bullying both in person and online. The constant harassment led to mental health issues which ultimately led to her taking her own life in January 2018. Her story helped gain national attention and sparked conversation regarding the need for better support for young people, and the importance of addressing bullying. Dolly's story represents many people's stories not only in Australia but worldwide. It has been almost 7 years since Dolly took her life, yet cyberbullying is still a major issue that is faced by many young Australians today. Her story helped create awareness surrounding cyberbullying, however further action is still needed.



Dolly Everett

Social media plays a large role in the influence of rising cyberbullying cases. Many social media outlets including Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram allow users to sign up without any verification of their age. This then allows young children to sign up, exposing them to the possibility of getting bullied online. Without proper authentication of age, children will continue to sign up for applications when they aren't of the suitable age. This then means that children can begin to be cyberbullied from a very young age, influencing them as they grow older to act a certain way. This will lead to a devastating increase in the possibility of suicidal rates at young ages.

The government has put an effort into putting an end to cyberbullying, however it is clear that it isn't working. Section 474.17 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Commonwealth) states that it is against the law to use a device or the internet in a menacing, harassing, or offensive way. Although this law states that it is illegal, it does not stop people from doing it as there is no harsh punishment for doing so. The use of social media also makes it very easy for perpetrators to get away with cyberbullying. Snapchat is used most commonly within teenagers as a form of communication, therefore accounting for a large sum of cyberbullying. Snapchat has a feature where the chats disappear after being sent and it indicates when a screenshot has been taken. Perpetrators use this to their advantage to say harmful things and get away with it as there is no proof. The Criminal Code Act doesn't account for the punishments that perpetrators should endure once they commit a crime. Similarly, the Online Safety Act 2021 makes the existing laws for online safety more expansive and stronger. However, this act also doesn't include punishments for those who bully others online.

In response to this, we believe that it is essential for a new law to be put in place to punish those who undertake the acts of cyberbullying. Alternatively, existing laws must include punishments for perpetrators. We believe that harsher punishments must be given to preparators to hopefully stop people from bullying people online, or at least heavily reduce the number of people who face bullying online. By enforcing harsh punishments for those who harass people online, it will hopefully scare people to not indulge in the actions in the first place. It will also mean that people will get punished for their wrongdoings. In reality, consequences for bullying should be taken as serious as consequences for murder and abuse. In both situations, it leads to the death or mental and physical pain of an individual, however murder and abuse is taken much more seriously than bullying. Laws need to be put in place to ensure that perpetrators take accountability for their actions as currently they put people through so much pain however they get to continue living their lives as if nothing happened. To ensure that society is fair, and victims get justice, laws must be put in place to punish those who cyberbully.

With stronger laws and improved safety and support systems, there will be an increase in well-being and mental health throughout Australia's youth, which will result in a much lower rate of suicide caused by cyberbullying. Furthermore, it will allow society to connect better with one another with no arising conflict, resulting in stronger relationships and a happier community.

The issue of cyberbullying in Australia demands urgent attention and reform. The tragic cases of young victims, such as Dolly Everett, highlights the devastating consequences and impacts online bullying leaves on youth. By strengthening laws and support

systems surrounding cyber bullying, Australia can take significant steps towards protecting its younger population and fostering a culture of respect and safety.