Bullying and young people, a white paper

THE MIX

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In the age of social media and a world of internet connection at our fingertips, young people the world over are more at risk of bullying than ever before. Gone are the days where they can return home and leave bullies either at school or within the workplace - now, they're vulnerable to abuse from others even in the comfort of their own homes.

With Covid-19 comes a new wave of issues facing young people and bullying, and how they're able to access support. Research into children and stress by the Children's Commissioner found that prior to the initial UK lockdown in March, **25% of young people identified bullying as a key source of their stress**[1].

To gain a better understanding of this, The Mix commissioned a survey with independent global public opinion and data company alongside its own survey accumulated via young people visiting The Mix website.
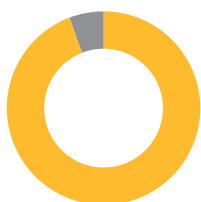
94% those who experienced cyberbullying had done so for the first time **prior to the National Coronavirus lockdown** that started on 23rd March
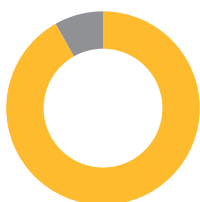
92% of young people feel either fairly or very confident that they can **recognise bullying** when they see such behaviour

60% of respondents are either **currently or have been bullied** at some point in their life

[1] Children's Commision,
https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/05/20/children-and-stress-whats-worrying-them-most/

"Bullying", for the purposes of this whitepaper, refers to treating (someone) in a cruel, insulting, threatening, or aggressive fashion: to act like a bully toward them[2] or to cause (someone) to do something by means of force or coercion[3]

Despite the surge in instances of bullying due to advances in technology, bullying is not a new phenomenon. Oftentimes referenced in media consumed by young people (such as TV shows, magazines or podcasts), it is a visible societal issue for which the impact is well documented.

[2] Merriam Webster definition one of "bully", https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bully

[3] Merriam Webster definition two of "bully", https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bully

Gathering our data

Where specified, data has been used from a survey carried out by YouGov on behalf of The Mix. The insights are from 1048 young people between 16 and 25 years old. Fieldwork was undertaken between 9th to 12th November and has been weighted to reflect the UK population.

The Mix also carried out an internal survey of 371 young people up to 25 years old - this was promoted onsite as well as through partners.

As a young person's charity, The Mix recognises the devastating impact that bullying can have on mental health and self-esteem, the trauma of which can oftentimes be carried into adulthood.

To be able to tackle this effectively, we carried out the two surveys to gain a better understanding of how the Covid-19 crisis has impacted bullying and the prevalence of cyberbullying online.

Who is being bullied?

Bullying can affect almost anyone, which is why it remains so prevalent and, sadly, a large proportion of people will have been on the receiving end at some point in their lives.

While bullying is not always targeted at people considered to be "vulnerable" - StopBullying.gov[4] highlights the following groups as being most at risk:
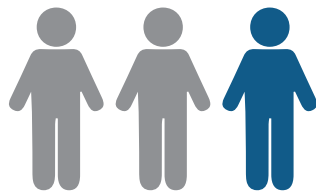
Are perceived as different from their peers, such as being overweight or underweight, wearing glasses or different clothing, being new to a school, or being unable to afford what kids consider "cool'

Do not get along well with others, seen as annoying or provoking, or antagonize others for attention

Are perceived as weak or unable to defend themselves

Are depressed, anxious, or have low self esteem

Are less popular than others and have few friends

4 StopBullying.gov, https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/at-risk

The Mix's research has shown that bullying is so commonplace in young people, that **nine in 10 feel** confident that they'd be able to spot bullying when they see it - whether physical, emotional or coercion. Whilst it appears that most young people are confident that they are able to spot bullying when they see it, this does little to prevent the problem. On top of the **60%** of young people who've experienced bullying in person, **36%** percent of those have experienced bullying online (cyberbullying) - although with the perimeters of cyberbullying slightly less defined, it could be that young people find it more difficult to identify.

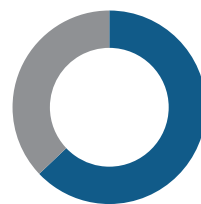The following figures are based on YouGov research commissioned by The Mix:

Bullying by gender

Males are slightly more likely to say that they are currently being bullied than females (3% vs 2%).

Females were slightly more likely to say that they have been bullied in the past (66%) than males (63%).
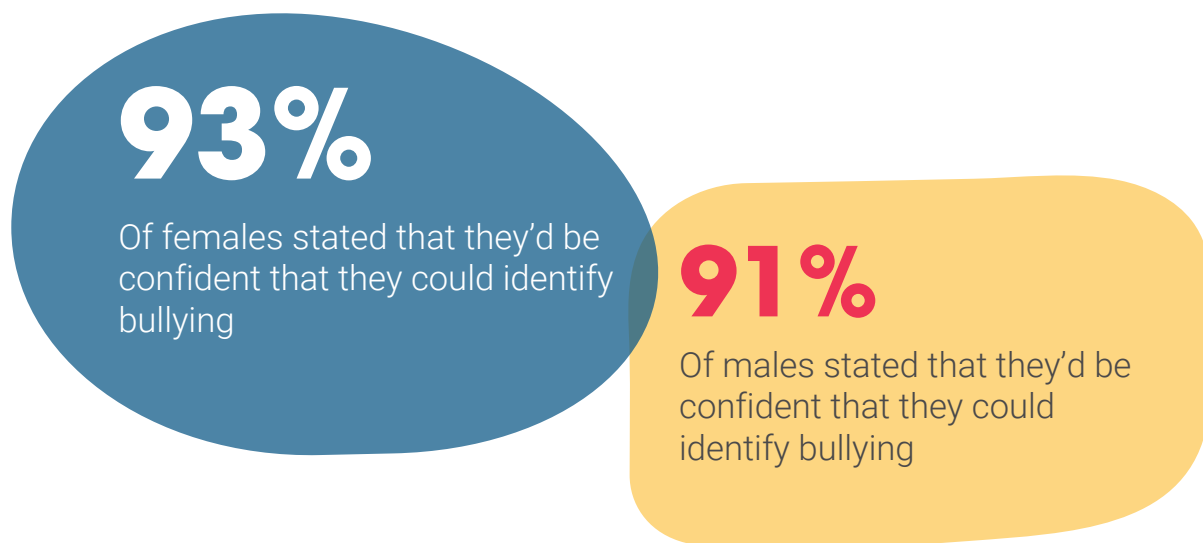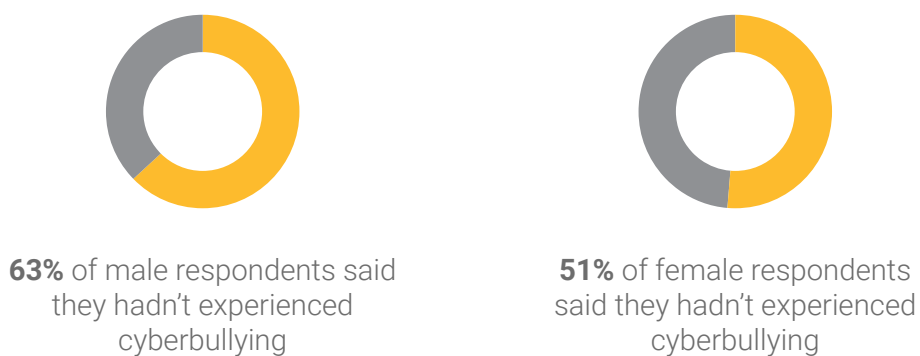
Females: 66%   **Males: 63%**

When it comes to differences in bullying between genders, there is no clear split - males were more likely to say that they're currently being bullied, whereas females were more likely to agree that they have been bullied in the past.

The YouGov data also found that there was very little difference between the gender's abilities to identify bullying.

93%
Of females stated that they'd be confident that they could identify bullying

91%
Of males stated that they'd be confident that they could identify bullying

Females were more likely to agree that bullying **reduced their self confidence and self-esteem (81% and 84%)** than their male counterparts **(60% and 61%)**.

63% of male respondents said they hadn't experienced cyberbullying

51% of female respondents said they hadn't experienced cyberbullying

With cyberbullying, the split between genders was a little clearer. Males were more likely to say that they'd never experienced cyberbullying, with **63%** saying they hadn't vs **51%** of females, but they were also more likely to say they didn't know whether they had been cyberbullied **(8% vs 6%)**.

This suggests that females are more likely to recognise cyberbullying than their male counterparts.
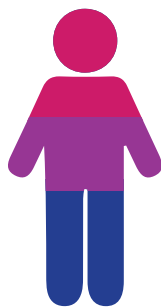
Bullying by sexual orientation

Gays or lesbians and bisexuals were more likely to say that they have been bullied in the past than heterosexuals:

Gays or lesbians:
60%

Bisexuals:
69%

Heterosexuals:
59%

It's a truth well known that people in the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to be targeted by bullies due to their **perceived difference from their peers**. Whether the bullying comments specifically refer to the young person's sexuality isn't known, 'homophobic bullying' refers to targeting an individual because they identify as homosexual, or using homophobic slurs against someone who may be heterosexual.

Homophobic slurs remain commonplace in schools across the UK, with research by Stonewall[5] showing that half of LGBTQIA+ students hear homophobic slurs 'frequently' or 'often' at school.

[5] Stonewall School Report 2017, https://www.stonewall.org.uk/school-report-2017

Bullying by location

Bullying can happen almost anywhere and at any time, especially now that cyberbullying is commonplace and young people can be targeted even in the comfort of their own home.

With that said, data from YouGov showed that young people living in Scotland were more likely to be currently being bullied than anywhere else in the **UK (7%)**, followed by **North of England (4%)**.

63%
Scotland

63%
East Midlands

61%
South East
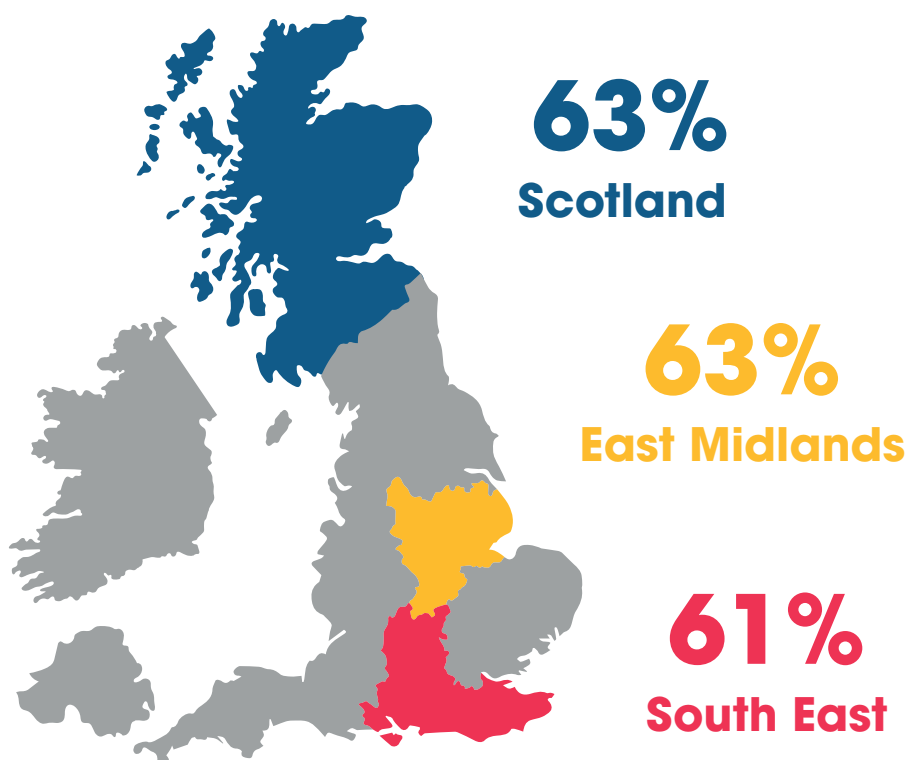
Young people from **Scotland** were yet again the most likely to say **(63%)** that they have been bullied in the past, closely followed by **East Midlands (63%)** and the **South East (61%)**.

Cyberbullying in 2020

39%
Of young people have witnessed someone being cyberbullied

22%
Of young people have experienced cyberbullying

17%
Of young people were unsure

Advances in technology and social media mean that bullying is no longer restricted to being in the physical presence of individuals who are exhibiting the bullying behaviour - for example, at school or in the workplace.

Females are more likely to experience cyberbullying than males.

Gays or lesbians and bisexuals were far more likely to say that they have experienced cyberbullying than heterosexuals

"Like I was worthless, I got rid of all social media and my phone for a year and a half because of it. It would really tear me apart, I felt like I wasn't wanted wherever I went"

- A respondent answer to 'How did it [cyberbullying] make you feel?' in The Mix survey.

Cyberbullying is certainly becoming an increasing issue, with new apps regularly coming onto the market offering new opportunities for young people to be targeted by bullies. Numerous social media platforms are beginning to take steps to try to tackle the issue;

- Twitter in as far back as 2017 announced "timeouts" for accounts that had been flagged as abusive[6].

- Snapchat claims that every report of abuse is reviewed by it's staff, usually within 24 hours.[7]

However, the difficulty in monitoring what constitutes cyberbullying and what doesn't is a blurred line, even down to Facebook's own Community Standards:

"We distinguish between public figures and private individuals because we want to allow discussion, which often includes critical commentary of people who are featured in the news or who have a large public audience...

We remove content that's meant to degrade or shame, including, for example, claims about someone's sexual activity. We recognize that bullying and harassment can have more of an emotional impact on minors, which is why our policies provide heightened protection for users between the ages of 13 and 18"[8]

42%

Of respondents who experienced cyberbullying reported that it made them want to use social media less often.

[6] TechCrunch "Twitter starts putting abuses in timeout" - https://techcrunch.com/2017/02/16/twitter-starts-putting-abusers-in-time-out/

[7] Snapchat report abuse on Snapchat, https://support.snapchat.com/en-US/a/report-abuse-in-app

[8] Facebook community guidelines, section 9: bullying and harassment

The Mix aims to create a safe space on it's platforms for young people to be able to share their own experiences with their peers, to learn from each other and to help them feel less isolated. Our community guidelines set strict rules for the content that we allow on our platforms - and even have a blanket ban on links to external sites that may contain "Harassing, threatening, abusive, vulgar, obscene, defamatory, or otherwise unlawful" content. We also disallow multiple accounts for individuals, in an effort to stem instances of false accounts which are oftentimes used for targeted bullying online and on social media platforms.

With cyberbullying, there's a misconception that because businesses or online forums have policies in place to help stop harassment, then handling it can be as simple as blocking a phone number, email address or social media profile, or simply reporting it to the relevant platform.

However, with young people socialising online more and more, it isn't simply a case of "switching off" from the harassment - and the impact it can have on a young person's wellbeing can be just as severe as when they're bullied in person.

75%

Of respondents felt the biggest impact that bullying had had on them was that it reduced their self-esteem

73%

Of respondents felt the biggest impact that bullying had had on them was that it reduced their confidence

In fact, when asked what impact cyberbullying had had on them, the most commonly cited effects were that it reduced their self-esteem (75%) and their confidence (73%). **63% of young people who've been cyberbullied recognised that it had an impact on their mental health** - which oftentimes extends beyond the period of time in which they've experienced bullying behaviour.

[9] The Mix community guidelines

Nip In The Bud suggested that:

"Young people who have experienced bullying are more likely to develop an anxiety disorder or suffer from depression. The same applies to those that are isolated and have difficulties with friendships at school."[10]

As with adults suffering from poor mental health such as anxiety or depression, **34%** of young people who had been cyberbullied noted that it caused issues with their sleep and **19%** said that it had caused them to fall behind in their studies.

"Cyberbullying could create an atmosphere of feeling like there is very little safety since cyberbullying can be done anywhere and at any time in contrast to offline bullying, so young people who are victims of cyberbullying might be less comfortable with the use of relevant technology"

- A YouGov response to 'What do you think the long-term effects of cyberbullying are for young people?'

[10] Nip In The Bud, How Bullying Can Affect Long Term Mental Health In Children

Impact of Covid-19 on bullying

As more and more young people have taken to online platforms over the years, it has become a key source in how they maintain friendships and keep in touch with their peers - and never have they been more dependent on this method of contact than during the Covid-19 lockdown.

In fact, the Mix survey found that **71% of survey respondents felt that Covid-19 hadn't had an impact on bullying** at all, meaning that while it hadn't got any worse, it also hadn't got any better.

9%

A further 9% of respondents reported that being physically apart from the people bullying them meant there was a reduction in this behaviour

8%

Whereas 8% of respondents reported that the bullying had got worse - and in some cases had even started during lockdown.

Females were more likely to say that they couldn't recall when the cyberbullying had begun (4%), with males being able to identify that they had either experienced cyberbullying before the national UK Coronavirus lockdown, or that it had begun during the lockdown.

> **"I've not been bullied for a while, so it hasn't had much of an impact on me personally. However, I've seen more online trolling, discrimination and unhelpful/disgusting "banter"**
>
> - The Mix survey respondent to the question 'What impact has the lockdown had on you in terms of bullying, if any?

> **"I think it's a lot more difficult for perpetrators to find targets, actually. Many people either don't have an easily findable social media, or just simply block their bullies"**
>
> - The Mix survey respondent to the question 'What impact has the lockdown had on you in terms of bullying, if any?'

Who exhibits bullying behaviour?

34% Of all respondents have been accused of bullying; similar to **35%** of those currently bullied or bullied at some point in their life

15% Of all respondents think their past behaviour could be described as bullying

24% Importantly, 24% of all respondents are unsure

The link between those who've been bullied and those who may go on to display bullying behaviour is clear - they have a symbiotic relationship. The Mix survey found that **12% of people who've been accused of bullying felt that this was because they were bullied first, and that their behaviour was a reaction.**

However, not all who were accused of bullying agreed that they had done so; some felt that the bully had accused them of deflecting attention away from their own actions to avoid getting in trouble themselves; others opted to note that the accusation was false.

18% Of people accused of bullying believed it was because their bully was jealous or wanted to get them in trouble.

17% 17% believed that the accusation that they had engaged in bullying behaviour was a misunderstanding or false allegation.

"The person bullying me lied to their parents about it and said that I was doing to them what they were doing to me"

- A respondent to The Mix survey who had been accused of bullying.

Why do young people engage in bullying behaviour?

Bullying is oftentimes written off as just one of those things that most young people experience, which creates a harmful narrative that it's a never ending cycle that can never truly be tackled. To be able to properly understand how best to identify ways to help reduce incidents of bullying, we must first understand why young people are inclined towards it.

¼

Data collected by The Mix found that over a **quarter** of people who had engaged in bullying behaviour were motivated by jealousy, sadness or insecurities. Almost the same number were likely to agree that peer pressure was a key motivator, feeling a need to fit in simply because their peers were doing it.

16%

Of young people acknowledged that they didn't know that their behaviour could be interpreted as bullying, or simply that they didn't know better.

"It wasn't a motivation as such, it was my lack of general knowledge in people's feelings and the way people's interpretations vary"

- A respondent on what they think their motivation for bullying behaviour is.

Support for bullying

In spite of the prevalence of bullying and the perceived protections in place to prevent bullying behaviours, young people still aren't quite getting the support they need when they experience bullying behaviour.

> While many schools have anti-bullying policies, the majority of this behaviour is likely to happen out of sight - and as a result, young people are less likely to seek support.

> "By law, all schools must have measures in place to prevent bullying and teachers, pupils and parents should be told what that policy is. A school's involvement in tackling bullying should not start at the point at which a child or student has been bullied."[11]

In fact, the Mix found that just over a third (36%) of young people currently being bullied or who have been at some point in their life reported that they did not seek support at all.

What support are young people getting for bullying?

Of the young people who did actively seek support for bullying, most appeared to opt for conversations with either people they were close to, or a professional. Worryingly, over a third of young people did not seek any support at all after experiencing bullying by a peer.

36%
Did not seek any support when being bullied

52%
Over half of young people spoke to friends or family

35%
Over a third spoke to a teacher or other professional

11 https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/

20% spoke to anothertrusted person about bullying

17% looked up information or advice on bullying online

17% sought a counselling service

According to the YouGov survey, the proportions for cyberbullying only looked slightly different. Of those who had experienced bullying behaviour online, a larger number of young people saw fit to discuss with a family member or friend, and they were more likely to seek support from a teacher. As this bullying occurred online, a further number reported the conversation with the relevant platform - for example, Facebook.

56% of young people who experienced cyberbullying spoke to friends or family

26% of young people who experienced cyberbullying spoke to a teacher

23% of young people who experienced cyberbullying flagged the conversation (i.e. reported it within the relevant online platform)

Females were far more likely than males to seek support in people around them, with 67% speaking to a friend or family member about it, and 29% opting to speak to a teacher. Males, however, were inclined towards seeking no support at all for cyberbullying, with 28% stating that they had never sought it out.

This could be a reflection of the widely held belief and numerous pieces of research that suggests men are less likely than women to seek support for their mental health in general - however it's important to recognise the damage that this can do. Mentalhealth.org states that:

> "Societal expectations and traditional gender roles play a role in why men are less likely to discuss or seek help for their mental health problems. We know that gender stereotypes about women – the idea they should behave or look a certain way, for example – can be damaging to them. But it's important to understand that men can be damaged by stereotypes and expectations too."[12]

What support do young people want for bullying?

The number of young people not seeking support with bullying might suggest that existing support isn't adequate or signposted enough - however, data collated by The Mix shows that the majority of young people would like to see more research based content available to them online **(22%),** covering topics such as:

- What the best and most appropriate steps are when bullied
- Ways to stop bullying
- How to speak up about bullying
- Coping strategies
- Types of bullying
- Ways to deal with people who bully, people to talk to or services, safe places (e.g. library)
- Explanation of when bullying becomes a crime and how to get help

Outside of relying on online articles for advice on how to recognise bullying and what to do about it, young people had a tendency toward talking through their issue, with **16%** stating that they'd opt for listening (non judgemental) /someone to talk to/ safe space where young people can talk. A further **13%** suggested that they'd make use of helplines.

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[12] Mentalhealth.org, Men And Mental Health: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/m/men-and-mental-health

The results of the survey by The Mix and the corresponding YouGov one show that there's **still some way towards tackling the issue of bullying**; and that an agile approach is necessary to understand the increasing threat that young people are facing online.

> **"I think that the best support you can give to those who are undergoing bullying is the reassurance that it does not last forever and it is very common that people don't see the line between a laugh and hurtful words. However it needs to be made clear that in no world is breaking down someone else's self confidence okay" - respondent to The Mix survey question "What support can The Mix provide to help people deal with bullying?"**

The Mix has been committed to helping young people through some tough situations they may be exposed to in life. We provide a number of services with the intention of answering questions on topics such as education, money, drink and drugs - and bullying.

Throughout this work, we've become all too familiar with the severe impact that bullying can have on young people, and regularly provide support for those who are experiencing bullying behaviour or have mental health problems as a result of it. When The Mix asked young people how bullying made them feel, survey respondents said:

> **"Like I didn't want to exist. This lasted for many years and I felt helpless because I was too scared to tell anyone."**

> **"Like I was worthless, I got rid of all social media and my phone for a year and a half because of it. it would really tear me apart, I felt like I wasn't wanted wherever I went."**

Our Mission is to become the first point of contact for any young person seeking help or information on any subject wherever and whenever they need it. We do this by producing articles and video content on our website, and offer phone, email, peer to peer and counselling services to young people who need it.