
LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS SUMMARY FOR THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH (NIH) ONLINE HARASSMENT RESEARCH PORTFOLIO

~ Prepared for the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse ~

BACKGROUND

In service of the [White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse](#), as part of the [U.S. National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence: Strategies for Action](#), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) conducted a landscape analysis of its research portfolio to understand the gaps, needs, and future directions for understanding the science of online and digital harassment on its impact on health-related outcomes. This landscape analysis is a necessary precursor to the workshop that NIH will be hosting in December 2023 to highlight what is known about the health consequences of online and digital harassment, and future research directions to better characterize the harms of and interventions to address its impacts. More specifically, this landscape analysis will inform the workshop by helping the NIH identify key topic areas that merit further exploration and scientists that could develop presentations and actively participate in discussions to help highlight possible future directions for research in this area. The NIH commitment to this task force is led by Dr. Valerie Maholmes (National Institute of Child Health and Development; NICHD) and Dr. Beth Jaworski (Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research; OBSSR).

LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS DESCRIPTION

At the NIH, portfolio analyses are conducted to support questions from senior leadership, requests from federal agencies or external agencies, for evaluation purposes, data-drive decision-making, and exploration and discovery. These analyses can help understand what kind of science is being conducted, how much money is being spent on certain areas of science, how science has changed over time, who is working with whom, and the impact of the funded research in terms of publications, intellectual property creation, novel interventions, and/or new clinical guidelines.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the current research portfolio at NIH, Kathryn Morris, MPH, Chief of Policy, Planning, and Analysis Branch at OBSSR analyzed R01 grants awarded between fiscal years 2018 through 2022.

The search utilized the following terms: (digital OR online OR cyber) AND (harassment OR bully* OR abuse OR discrimin* OR dating abuse OR stalking OR doxxing OR trolling OR revenge porn OR sextortion). Additional terms were initially included, but rather than refining the data set, only added more noise. Any projects that included animal subjects were excluded. The initial search yielded 5,476 projects, of which 2,065 were R01s.

However, the majority of these projects still did not directly address the primary concerns of the task force. Thus, the query was restricted to “online harassment” and “digital harassment” for fiscal years 2013 through 2022 (ten fiscal years). This search yielded 19 unduplicated projects. Within these 19 projects, 15 were new R01 awards, one was part of a phased award, and three were supplemental grants.

KEY FINDINGS

- The current research portfolio addressing online abuse and harassment at the NIH addresses populations highly relevant for the task force, including: sexual and gender minority populations (n = 11); pediatric populations (n = 9); and violence against women (n = 4)
- Some of the most relevant research in this domain is currently being supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Development), the National Institute on Drug Abuse the National Institute on Aging, and the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities
- Among grants awarded to support training in topics generally related to this area (only 38 Ks and no Ts), just under one-third (n = 11) were relevant to online abuse and harassment.
- 766 peer-reviewed publications resulted from NIH-funding related to online abuse and harassment. The top publications appeared in journals focused on violence, substance abuse, and HIV/AIDS. However, additional hand coding is needed to refine the search.
- Since FY2021, two Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) and Special Interest (NOSI) focused on harassment in the STEM workforce, but none specifically included “online” or “digital” harassment in the title. Many more NOFOs and NOSIs focused on social connection and social media as the mechanism for research, with a large number (n=35) including social media in the title or description.

NEXT STEPS & DIRECTIONS FOR WORKSHOP PLANNING

- Online abuse and harassment is a significant public health concern, but merits more research on a broader range of its health impacts, and training opportunities for scientists to specialize in this area.
- More research is needed to characterize the prevalence of online abuse and harassment, and document its impact across the lifespan and on physical and mental health.
- Among research that has been conducted, relatively little is known about interventions that may prevent engagement in online abuse and harassment or strategies for alleviating its negative health impacts. In addition to characterizing the epidemiology and mechanisms of online abuse and harassment, more research is needed to explore the development of effective interventions.