

THE CANADIAN PRESS



Activist calls for prevention, not prison, to combat cyber-bullying; Prevention urged to stop cyber-bullying

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Published February 27, 2013

Also published on Macleans.ca, in the *Edmonton Journal*, and on GlobalWinnipeg.com

OTTAWA - Threatening to throw the book at young people who bully others online likely won't stop them from picking on their peers, an anti-bullying activist says.

That's because youngsters often don't make the connection between illegal acts and their consequences, said Bill Belsey of Bullying.org, an international project that educates people on bullying.

"Prevention needs to be our priority," he said.

A private members' bill aims to amend the Criminal Code to recognize cyberbullying as an offence. Liberal MP Hedy Fry introduced Bill C-237 in September 2011 as a response to the rising trend of bullying through text messaging, social media and other online forums.

On Wednesday, Conservatives on a House of Commons committee voted against Fry's bill after witnesses raised concerns about it.

Witnesses at the committee called for government support, centred on education and prevention, rather than criminal legislation.

"This would have a modest effect on most teens because it fails to understand the teenage brain," Belsey said.

He said the legislation does not take into account the mindset of young people. In his experience as a middle school teacher and father, Belsey said teenagers live in the moment and do not make the connection between cause and effect, so legislation would be unlikely to deter them.

The death of B.C. teen Amanda Todd by suicide last fall exposed the serious impacts of cyberbullying. The teen was found dead shortly after posting a YouTube video where she spoke about the abuse she endured in person and online. The video went viral and her story made international headlines.

The proposed legislation would make it easier to apply charges to online bullies. Currently, cyberbullying may be recognized as a criminal act falling under criminal harassment, defamatory libel, false messages or hate propaganda in the Criminal Code.

"Regulating cyberbullying is akin to refereeing a soccer game outside the stadium," said Peter Jon Mitchell, a senior researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.

He cited concerns of drawing more youth into the criminal justice system and leaving the issue up to police rather than communities.

"The best approach is to empower parents, educators and youth to work together," Mitchell said.

However, the Canadian Teachers Federation supported the bill, stating teachers and students required legal protection from cyberbullying.

"Our policy takes a two-pronged approach which focuses on education and protection initiatives," said president Paul Taillefer.

He called for a national conversation between families, schools and communities to address the issues of cyberbullying and facilitate change.

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