

# Death by bullying – a topic gripping the country

By Jessica Bennett, Newsweek

It started with rumors, a love triangle, and a dirty look in a high-school bathroom. Soon jokes about an “Irish slut” cropped up on Facebook, and a girl’s face was scribbled out of a class photo hanging up at school. One day, in the cafeteria, another girl marched in, pointed at her, and shouted “stay away from other people’s men.” A week later, as the girl walked home, a car full of students crept close. One kid hurled a crumpled soda can out the window, followed closely by shrieks of “whore!”



If your children had behaved like this, how would you want them punished? Certainly a proper grounding would be in order; computer privileges revoked. Detention, yes—maybe even suspension. Or what about 10 years in jail? Now what if we told you that the girl had gone home after the soda-can incident and killed herself—discovered by her little sister, hanging in a stairwell. Now which punishment fits the crime?

This is the conundrum of Phoebe Prince, the 15-year-old South Hadley, Mass., girl the media have already determined was “bullied to death”—her alleged “mean girl” tormentors charged with felony crimes. Bullied to death is the crime of the moment, the blanket explanation slapped on suicide cases from Texas to California, where two 13-year-olds recently killed themselves, bullied for being gay. The most twisted example yet came last week, when Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old New Jersey college student, threw himself off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate and a friend allegedly streamed a Webcam video of his tryst with a man.

Cases like these are being invoked as potent symbols for why, in the digital age, schools need bullying policies and states need legislation. But do they? Is the notion of being bullied to death valid? No one would deny that Clementi's roommate did the unconscionable; the alleged crime is all the more disturbing because of the specter of antigay bias. Yet he couldn't have known how badly the stunt would end. (He and his friend now face up to five years in prison for privacy invasion; there is also talk of additional bias charges.) In the case of Prince, the answer of who's to blame might change if you knew that she had tried to kill herself before the epithets, was on medication for depression, and was struggling with her parents' separation. So where is the line now between behavior that's bad and behavior that's criminal? Does the definition of old-school bullying need to be rewritten for the new-media age?

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