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One in ten Florida teens report engaging in "digital self-harm"

December 3, 2020 – Approximately 10 percent of Florida middle and high school students report having engaged in “digital self-harm” – they have cyberbullied themselves. It is an emerging form of self-harm that may be increasing among adolescents, according to a recent study led by an FIU researcher.

Digital self-harm is when an individual anonymously posts mean or hurtful comments about themselves online, according to Ryan Meldrum, lead author of the study and associate professor of

criminology and criminal justice in FIU's Steven J. Green School of International & Public Affairs. This behavior was first named following the suicide of Hannah Smith, a 14-year-old British girl who had made negative posts to herself on social media in the weeks leading up to her death in 2013.

Adolescents may be more likely to engage in digital self-harm after being bullied or cyberbullied, Meldrum explained. Being bullied can lead adolescents to have negative thoughts about themselves, and this is known to make adolescents more likely to physically self-harm themselves to distract from the emotional pain, he said. Digital self-harm might follow a similar pathway, where bullying victims turn to the internet to post hurtful things about themselves in hopes that others will respond positively and alleviate the negative feelings that stem from being bullied.

"Now that adolescents have digital outlets where they can go online and post negative things about themselves, they may do so in order to elicit comments from others saying 'No, you're not that, you're beautiful, you're great,'" Meldrum said. "They're seeking some sort of validation that may alleviate those negative emotions."

The team of researchers used data drawn from two questions about digital self-harm that were included on the 2019 Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey (FYSAS), which collected data from 10,000 Florida middle and high school students. The survey found that 10 percent of Florida students reported having engaged in digital self-harm in the past 12 months, and 6 percent reported having done so in the past 30 days.

"The frequency of digital self-harm may be on the rise because, as a result of COVID-19, adolescents are spending a lot more time online and are having a lot less face-to-face interaction," Meldrum said.

The study, published last month in *Deviant Behavior*, is only the second peer-reviewed study published about digital self-harm, Meldrum said. He says the research team is trying to bring knowledge and awareness to the behavior to aid

professionals who may interact with adolescents engaging in digital self-harm. It's possible that, like physical self-harm, digital self-harm may correlate with suicidal thoughts.

"This study is important for raising awareness about digital self-harm for people in the field, such as psychologists, pediatricians, school counselors, and social workers, as they may consider incorporating questions about the behavior into screening tools," Meldrum said. "It's especially important if digital self-harm may be a stepping stone to serious forms of physical self-harm. We may be able to prevent physical self-harm or later suicide attempts if we can predict that sequence of events."

The research team also includes Justin W. Patchin from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, Jacob T.N. Young from Arizona State University, and Sameer Hinduja from Florida Atlantic University.

About FIU:

Florida International University is Miami's public research university, focused on student success. According to U.S. News and World Report, FIU has 26 top-50 rankings in the nation among public universities and Washington Monthly Magazine ranks FIU among the top 20 public universities contributing to the public good and No. 12 for social mobility. FIU is a top U.S. research university (R1), with more than \$200 million in annual expenditures. FIU ranks 15th in the nation among public universities for patent production, which drives innovation, and is one of the institutions that helps make Florida the top state for higher education. The Next Horizon fundraising campaign is furthering FIU's commitment to providing students Worlds Ahead opportunities. Today, FIU has two campuses and multiple centers, and supports artistic and cultural engagement through its three museums: Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, the Wolfsonian-FIU, and the Jewish Museum of Florida-FIU. FIU is a member of Conference USA, with more than 400 student-athletes participating in 18 sports. The

university has awarded more than 330,000 degrees to many leaders in South Florida and beyond. For more information about FIU, visit www.fiu.edu.

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