

## Are “Facebook Murders” a Growing Trend?

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**I**S FACEBOOK BECOMING A PLACE where people mistakenly think they can literally get away with murder? In a 2011 Facebook murder-for-hire case in Philadelphia, PA, a 19-year-old mother offered \$1,000 on Facebook to kill her 22-year-old boyfriend, the father of her 2-year-old daughter. The boyfriend was killed while the only two suspects responding to the mother’s post were in custody, so there is speculation that the murder was drug related. The mother pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit murder, and was immediately paroled on a 3- to 23-month sentence.

Other “Facebook murder” perpetrators are being brought to justice, one way or another:

- In September 2012, a 15-year-old Dutch boy was sentenced to a year in juvenile detention and up to 3 years in a psychiatric institution after he confessed to killing a schoolgirl whose Facebook posts reportedly led to a 1,000-euro contract for her murder.
- In March 2012 in the Dominican Republic, a 24-year-old man asked his 25-year-old ex-girlfriend to meet him at a motel, where he shot her and then himself after seeing a picture of her with another man on Facebook. Relatives said they had been together for 3 years before breaking up about a month before the tragedy.
- In Tennessee at the end of January 2012, a 60-year-old father of a woman conspired with a 38-year-old man, who had romantic feelings for the woman, to murder the couple who had unfriended the woman on Facebook. Harassing comments had been made on Facebook before the couple, a 36-year-old man and his 23-year-old girlfriend, were found dead. Their 8-month-old baby was found unharmed. The wife of one accused man was charged with evidence tampering in September 2012, and conviction of the men is pending at the time of writing.

As you can see, these uses of Facebook cut across all age groups. Some people say that the term “Facebook murder” is a misnomer, that the altercations leading up to the crime would simply have taken place via another medium or in person in pre-Facebook days. Indeed, in 1998, this journal reported that “a murder confession on-line last year touched off a storm of controversy with involvement of the FBI, and raised many difficult and complicated questions for law enforcement, network administrators, as well as chat room and bulletin board members.”<sup>1</sup> And in 2000, this journal published an article that alerted women to the dangers of cyberstalking, noting that it “may result in psychological

distress as well as physical and/or sexual assault and even murder.”<sup>2</sup>

With the increased attention being paid to cyberbullying these days, is there a connection between online bullying and violent behaviors such as murder? Because online bullies don’t need to be physically strong or able to control others in the real world, is Facebook becoming a vehicle for aggressive behavior? Researchers are beginning to connect the dots to answer these questions.

A recent study of 1,676 Singaporean students aged 13 to 17 on Facebook suggests that a student’s real-world experience with bullying is highly predictive of his/her involvement in cyberbullying on Facebook.<sup>3</sup> Previous research has demonstrated the relationship between bullying and violent behavior in a sample of more than 15,000 U.S. girls and boys in sixth through tenth grades.<sup>4</sup>

And what particular role does “unfriending” play in inciting violence? A southwestern U.S. study of 550 adult Facebook users “determined that being unfriended on Facebook can represent a form of relationship termination that can elicit rumination and negative emotion, particularly when Facebook usage is intense, the unfriender’s identity is known, the unfriending is perceived to have occurred for Facebook-related reasons, and the Facebook friend request was initiated by the individual who was unfriended.”<sup>5</sup>

We hope that grassroots programs such as the C.R.I.M.E. Teens Project (Compassion, Respect, Inspiration, Motivation, Empathy), a youth-led violence prevention program,<sup>6</sup> can serve as an example to lead teens away from cyberbullying and associated violence. When young people lead a trend, perhaps adults can follow and reverse the disturbing trend revealed by recent “Facebook murders.”

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