BOSTON -- Like their verbal counterparts, cyber names are not sticks and stones, but they are hurting many young Internet users, according to a 2007 survey of middle school and high school students.

In an Online Bullying and Predators Survey, 28 percent of teens and pre-teens, ages 11 to 19, said that they have been the victim of online bullying, or cyberbullying.

The National Crime Prevention Council describes cyberbullying as teens using the "Internet, cell phones, or other devices to send or post text or images to hurt or embarrass another person."

The 2007 survey was conducted by the Kids/Teen Division of the Maine-based online safety organization Working To Halt Online Abuse. Founded in 2005, the division focuses on the needs of young people who have been victimized or taken advantage of on the Internet.

Jayne Hitchcock, president of WHOA, said cyberbullying is a major issue for young Internet users. Online communication -- either through e-mail, chatting, text-messaging or other means -- has become indispensable to the social lives of so many teens and pre-teens, she said. “The Internet’s not going away,” Hitchcock said. “[Cyberbullying] has to be dealt with.”

Hitchcock said a recent rise in cyberbullying can be attributed to the increasing ease in which teens and preteens can connect to the Internet.

"I think cyberbullying is definitely on the rise due to the fact that a lot more kids and teens are not only online via their computers, but also via their cell phones," Hitchcock said.

The WHOA survey did not look at how participants connected, but some did say they were bullied via text message.

The participants -- 202 females and 193 males from three schools in Maine -- were asked a number of questions about their experiences with online bullying, including how they were bullied (via e-mail, chatroom, instant message or others), how they reacted and why, who did the bullying and whether the students themselves had ever bullied someone.

The survey did not report how many of each sex were victimized, but over half of the reported bullying was done by males.  Of those bullied, 65 percent said it was done through

e-mail, the Web site MySpace.com, chat rooms and online games.

Less than half of those bullied reported the abuse to authorities because bullying “wasn’t a big problem” or they “didn’t want to make a big deal of it.”

Still, some teens said they didn’t report the bullying because they were scared, they didn’t think anyone would believe them or they didn’t know how to report it.

More than half of all participants, whether bullied or not, said they had been contacted online by a stranger. Most replied to the stranger, and almost a third of them didn't tell anyone about the contact.

The survey results show a need to educate teens and pre-teens about online safety, Hitchcock said. “You have to learn how to take care of these cases before the situation escalates to a serious problem,” she said. “Police and schools don’t know how to deal with it.”

WHOA conducted the survey to help identify the areas of online-safety education that most need improvement. The responses suggest educators need to be “proactive, rather than reactive,” Hitchcock said, in teaching online safety.

Regardless of what the survey showed about cyberbullying, Hitchcock said she was “very pleased” with the net savvy displayed by the almost 400 young participants.