

The Impact of COVID-19 on Cyber-victimization Experiences Among Middle School Students

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Abstract

Adolescents' frequent use of social media and other forms of electronic communication has skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and adolescents are using these platforms for schoolwork and socialization. Researchers have yet to explore a possible consequence of this increased usage: an increase in cyber-victimization among adolescents. To date, most research has examined adolescent cyber-victimization in international spaces during the pandemic, but not as much research has been conducted in the United States. Additionally, it is nearly impossible to find research that focuses on cyber-victimization rates in the United States before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is what this research aims to address.

Participants were two cohorts of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students from an urban middle school. Both cohorts' self-reported rates of cyber-victimization were examined before (spring and fall 2019, early spring 2020) and during the pandemic (spring of 2021). Results indicated a large number of adolescents experienced cyber-victimization, but these rates were similar before the pandemic to current rates of cyber-victimization. This research aims to inform those working and living with adolescents of the risks associated with excessive social media use, including experiencing cyber-victimization. These results can be used to support students who have experienced cyber-victimization before and during the pandemic, and to help practitioners strategize ways to inform and enhance future prevention programs. It is crucial to understand the

consequences of this digital world during a global pandemic, and future researchers should consider the associations between cyber-victimization and adolescent mental health concerns.

Keywords: cyber-victimization, middle school, COVID-19 pandemic, social media

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INTRODUCTION

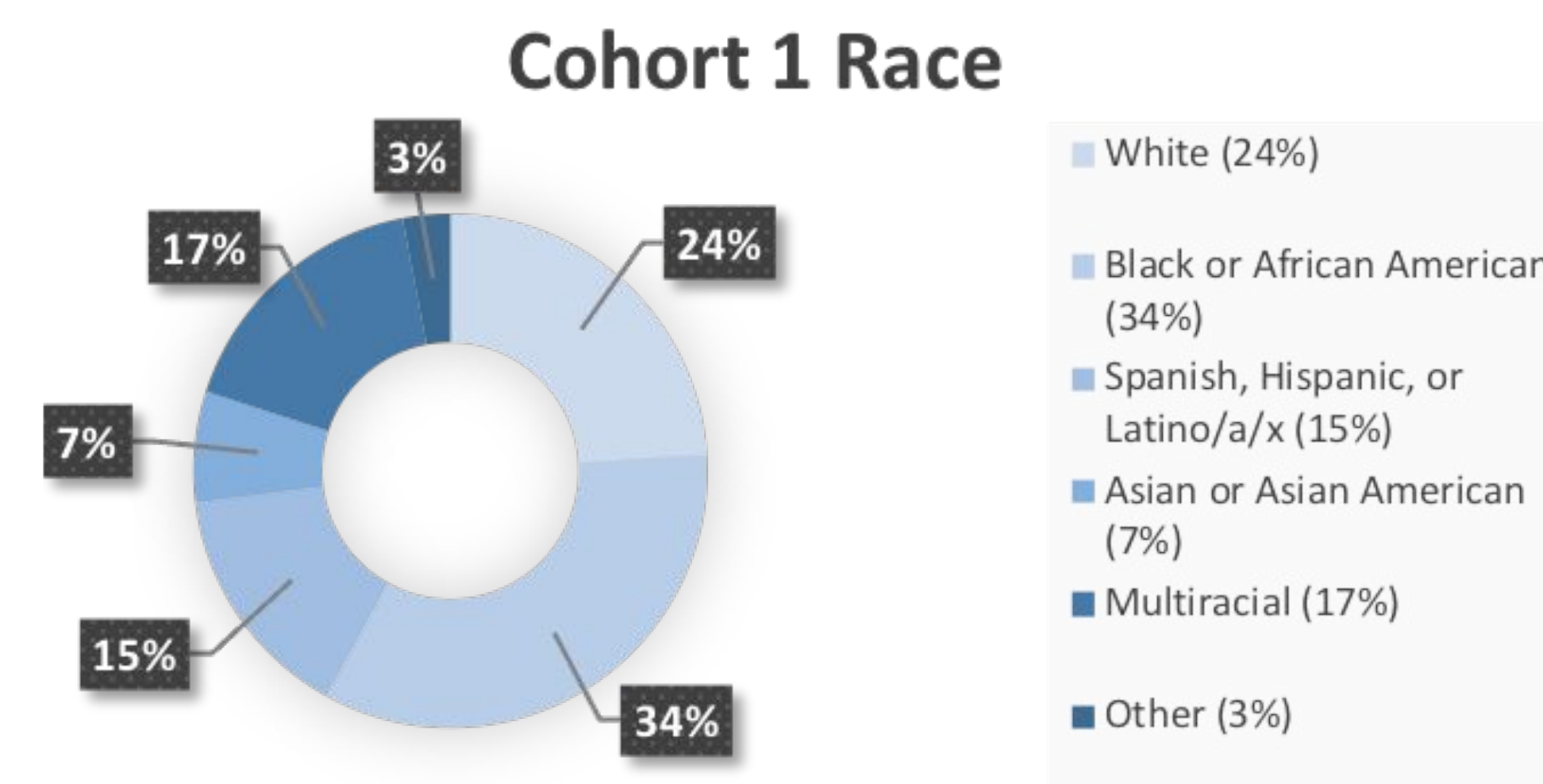
- ❖ Cyber-victimization is defined as any type of bullying or harm done using electronic sources (Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011).
- ❖ This type of bullying is more volatile and harmful due to the protection of anonymity, limited adult supervision, and larger possible audiences to victimize (Dempsey et. al., 2009).
- ❖ In 2017, 23% of youth in middle school had experienced some form of cyber-victimization (CDC, 2017).
- ❖ 32.7% of cyber-victimization victims stated the perpetrator was someone that they thought was a friend.
- ❖ 27.7% of cyber-victimization victims stated the perpetrator was someone from their school (Waasdorp and Bradshaw, 2015).
- ❖ Previous studies have focused on the relationship between traditional bullying and cyber-victimization (Kowalski and Limber, 2007).

CURRENT STUDY

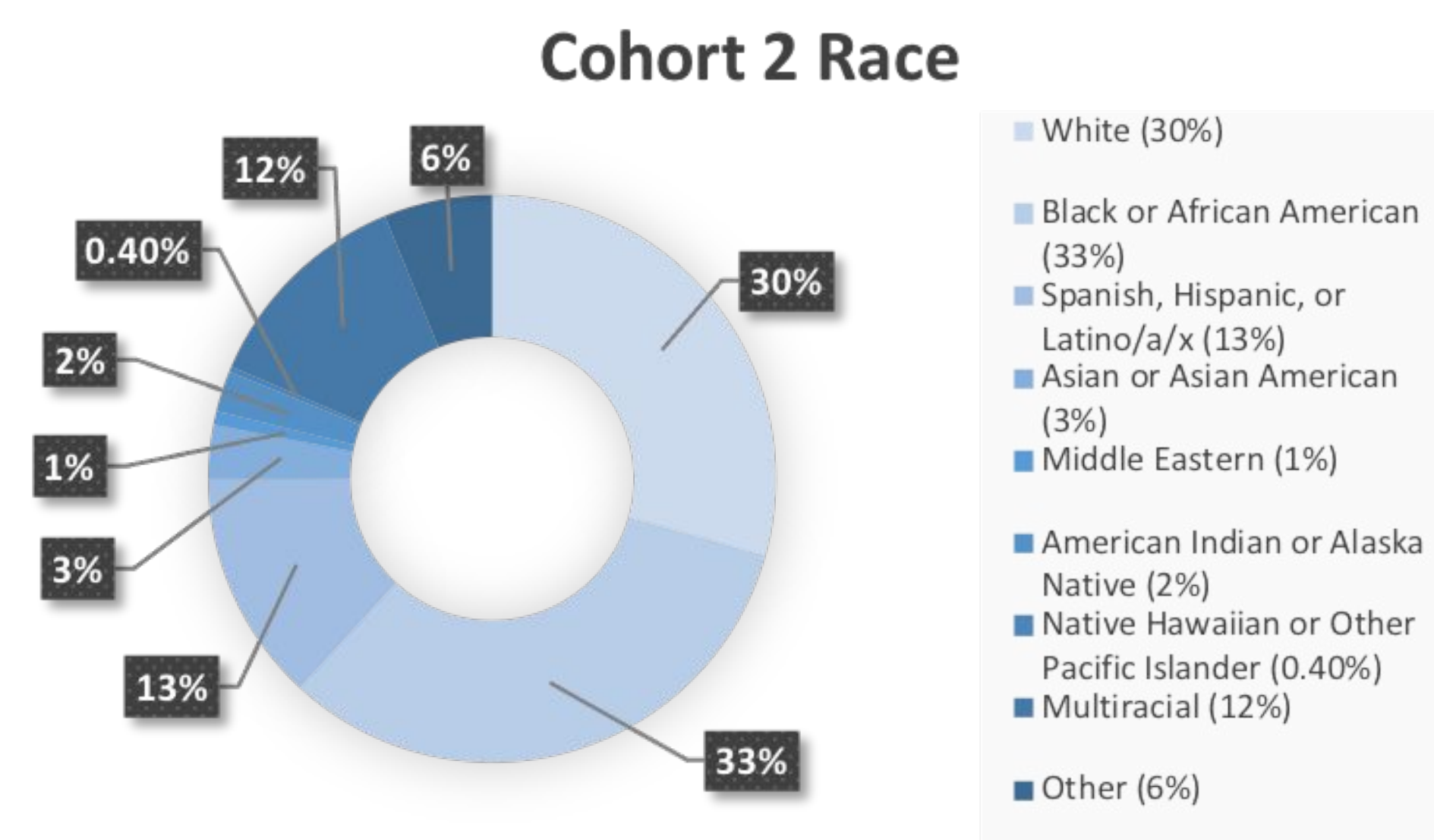
- ❖ Research to date has focused on cyber-victimization pre-pandemic
- ❖ Studies have not examined the impact of increased electronic and social media usage due to COVID-19
- ❖ Our study aims to change this as we are comparing cyber-victimization rates among middle schoolers from before the pandemic to current rates in 2021
- ❖ Our study has specified the different types of perpetrators of cyber-victimization among students
 - There have not been many studies that have done this
 - Breakdown of cyber-victimization from friend, dating partner, someone at school, stranger, family, or other

METHOD

- ❖ Participants included two cohorts of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students from an urban middle school
 - Cohort 1 followed sixth graders through eighth grade
 - Spring 2019
 - Fall 2019
 - Spring 2021
 - 45% identified as male, 53% identified as female, 1% identified as transgender, and 1% identified as other



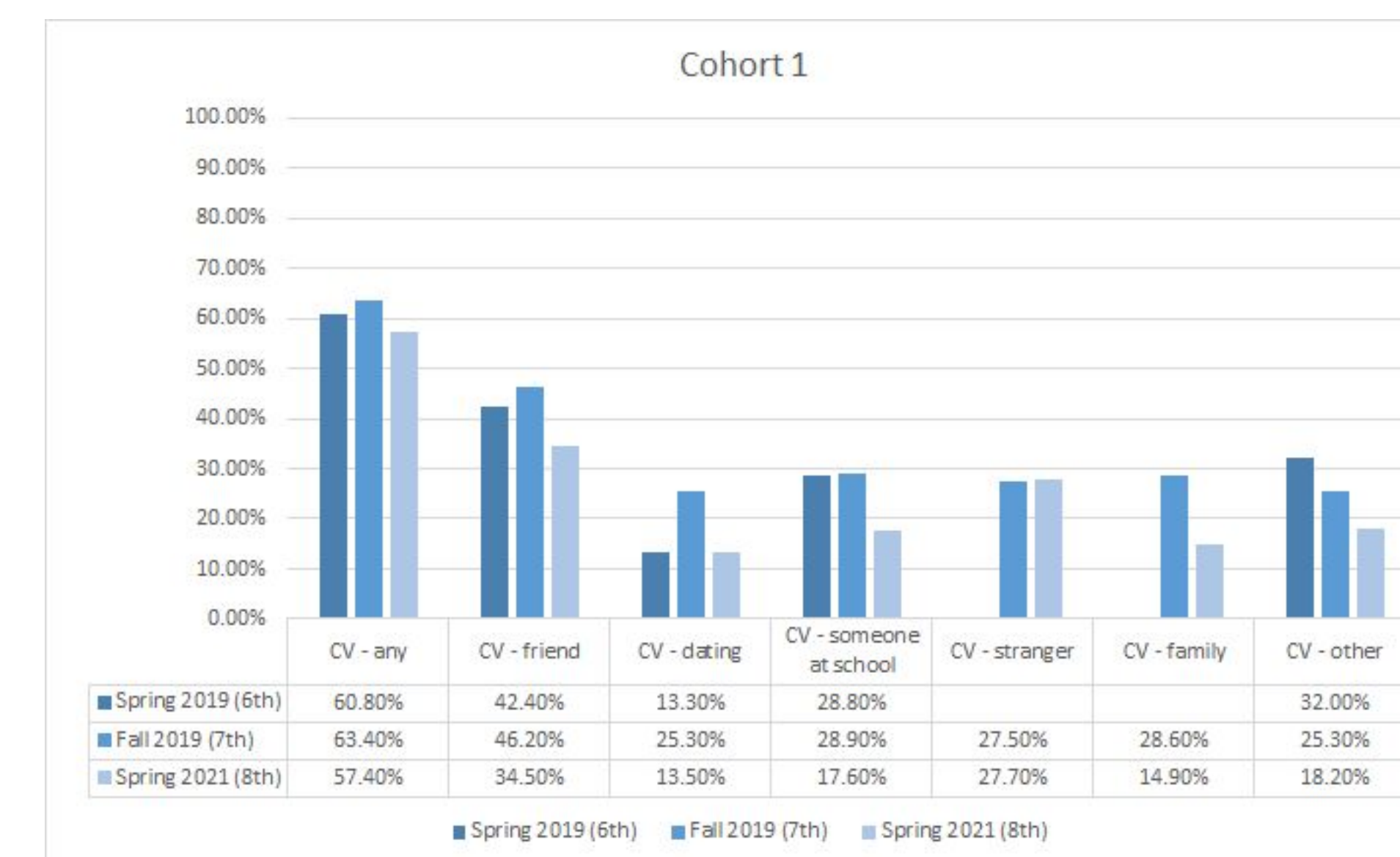
- Cohort 2 followed sixth graders through seventh grade
 - Fall 2019
 - Spring 2020
 - Spring 2021
- 50% identified as male, 48% identified as female, 4% identified as transgender, and 1% identified as other



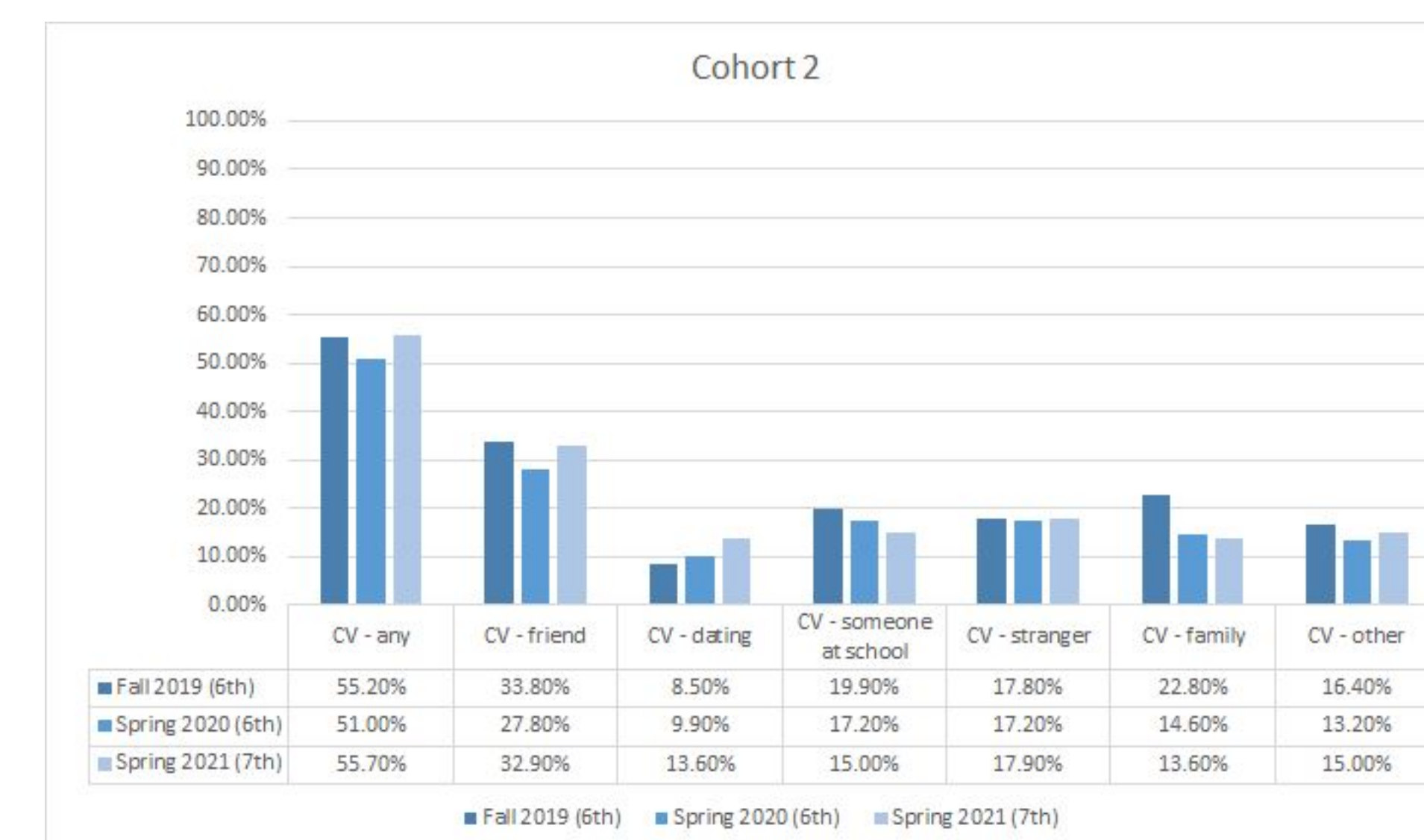
- ❖ Participants completed a self-reported questionnaire about relationships with peers and experiences with cyber-victimization before and during COVID-19 (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011)

RESULTS

- ❖ Cohort 1 results
 - No statistical change in cyber-victimization overall in the most recent wave
 - Decrease in cyber-victimization from a dating partner, someone at school, and family



- ❖ Cohort 2 results
 - No statistical change in cyber-victimization overall in the most recent wave
 - Increase in cyber-victimization from a dating partner, but decrease from someone at school and family



- ❖ Both cohorts experienced a decrease in cyber-victimization from someone at school and family (likely related to COVID-19)
- ❖ Important to note how high cyber-victimization was from a stranger from both cohorts, but specifically Cohort 1
 - Stayed relatively constant throughout all waves of data collected

DISCUSSION

- Results show there was not a statistical increase in cyber-victimization from the impact of COVID-19.
- ❖ There may not have been an increase because:
 - Students matured as they moved up in age and grade level.
 - They may have experienced more intimate friendships and relationships.
 - There was a lack of face-to-face interaction, or they were not able to connect/meet with peers.
 - Parents/guardians may have been more aware of what happens online and had more restrictions on their child's internet use.
 - ❖ It is important for schools to understand the impact that COVID-19 has had on its students.

LIMITATIONS

- ❖ Conducted in a mid-size urban area; results may be different in other communities and schools
- ❖ There were less students surveyed this year compared to past years
 - Due to the pandemic, there was a decline in how much data could be collected
- ❖ The latest wave of data was collected virtually whereas it is usually done in person
 - Students may have had a lack of concentration or willingness to participate

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References are available upon request

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