Are bullies criminals? Some believe bullying should carry criminal charges, while others argue that criminalizing the act of bullying only adds to the problem. What do you think?

Read the articles on bullying and write an essay in which you argue for or against bullying being a punishable crime. Use evidence from the text(s) to support your position.

“SHOULD BULLIES BE TREATED AS CRIMINALS?”

By Greg Toppo with USAToday

The Prince Case

Perhaps the most notorious bullying case in recent years took place in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where on January 14, 2010, Phoebe Prince, also a high school freshman, hanged herself from a stairwell in her home. Police concluded that in the three months before her death, a small group of classmates had relentlessly bullied the 15-year-old.

On March 29 of that year, District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel announced felony criminal indictments against six teens, five of whom were minors. The most serious charge carried a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Two years later, none of the six has gone to trial. Prosecutors dropped statutory rape charges against one teen, and the other five struck plea deals on lesser misdemeanor charges for probation and community service.

Attorney Richard Cole, a Massachusetts school safety consultant who testified last year before a state commission reviewing bullying laws, said Massachusetts has “enough criminal statutes right now for police or prosecutors” to go after bullies. Massachusetts prosecuted Phoebe’s case under civil rights law, but a spate of new legislation in other states forces schools to clamp down on bullies with the help of law enforcement.

Though anti-bullying advocates welcome the attention the issue has been getting, they say much of the new legislation doesn’t address the underlying psychological issues behind bullying or fund training for teachers, counselors and administrators on what to do when victims come forward. As a result, they say, schools are unprepared to react, even as victims’ expectations for justice rise.

“Criminalizing these behaviors is not going to be the most effective thing to prevent them,” said Elizabeth Englander, director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. It’s hard to know, she said, whether pursuing criminal charges will prevent bullying or simply “drive the problem underground.”

Research shows that children struggling with mental health problems are especially vulnerable to being bullied. Though few would disagree that extreme harassment and intimidation deserve swift punishment, Englander and other experts wonder whether teenagers should be prosecuted if a vulnerable classmate reacts with suicide. “Something in the system fails when children have to resort to extreme violence,” she said.

High-profile “bullycide” cases increase the pressure communities feel to punish bullies. An opinion poll conducted in February 2010, weeks after Phoebe’s death, found that 61% of Massachusetts voters said school bullying should be a crime.
She noted that her group’s most recent school climate survey in 2009 found that fewer than one in six gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students said teachers or other school staff consistently intervened when homophobic remarks were made in their presence. Criminalizing bullying, she said, is “part of a move to talk only about the individual,” not the entire system’s response to abusive behavior.

She said states should look to model legislation in Maine, signed last months by Gov. Paul LePage, a Republican, that focuses on prevention and on training for teachers. The state Legislature passed it with wide margins in both the House and Senate. It provides schools with a clear definition of bullying in an attempt to help teachers figure out how to proceed.

**MAKE BULLYING PUNISHABLE BY LAW**

By Dani Burns, Wisconsin Dells Events April 16, 2010

A couple of stories in the news lately simply break my heart.

One of the stores is about a 15-year-old girl from Massachusetts who committed suicide because she had been bullied by her peers.

The other story was about a girl from Florida, also 15, who had been beaten so badly that she had to be put in a drug-induced coma in hopes that time will sufficiently heal the severe head injuries she received after being bullied, which then escalated to an attack.

I realize that bullying is not a new behavior that today’s adolescents have only recently developed, but it seems that technology has put a whole new spin on this devastating, life-changing behavioral pattern. The first story I mentioned that took place in Massachusetts involved the use of Facebook. The second story, in Florida, involved text messaging.

History has shown us that aggression and violence are easier to partake in when surrounded by a crowd. In other words, someone is more likely to speak out, aggravate or attack when backed or surrounded by a crowd. When put into a one-on-one situation, most people revert to more passive behavior. I find that to be such a shame.

Imagine what the world would be like if we, as a society, were more apt to be nice and polite in a crowd. My inner logic tells me that this fact is completely backwards. Unfortunately, statistics and personal experiences prove it is true.

It’s also obvious that it is much easier to be mean using technology such as text messaging and the internet than it is to be mean face-to-face. I suppose typing and reading nasty things is easier than having to hear them in your own voice.

The biggest thing that caught my attention about these stories of bullying and violence was that the prosecutor in the Massachusetts case was struggling to find criminal charges that actually fit the crime.

The case in Florida was a little more cut and dry because the escalation to physical violence was evident. However, the case in Massachusetts is a much more difficult situation because the victim took her own life. There is no argument that the nine teenagers who were named, participated in the bullying. The question is: is bullying a crime?

I believe that bullying is a learned behavior and that teenagers are learning this behavior from watching adults. I also believe that more adults should take active roles in teaching their children how to treat one another and how to handle their emotions when they are being treated badly. I know, in a perfect world, this would be simple, even attainable, but that is not the world we live in.
I don’t believe you have the right to kill or hurt someone because they were mean to you, even if they have been mean to you over an extended period of time, which is what bullying is. I do believe that, just like stalking, bullying should be a crime.

Too many people were tormented, terrified and even killed before stalking became an acknowledged crime. I hope it doesn’t take as long for bullying to also be punishable by law. Bullying, a psychological and social tormenting that has, in the past, led to school shootings, brutal beatings and teen suicides, is, in my opinion, a crime.