

Online Predators—Myth versus Reality

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Media stories about “online predators” who use the Internet to gain access to young victims have become a staple of news reports since the late 1990s. Much of the publicity about these cases depicts online molesters who use the Internet to lure children into sexual assaults [5]. In the stereotypical media portrayal, these online child molesters lurk in Internet venues popular with children and adolescents [13]. They use information publicly divulged in online profiles and social networking sites to identify potential targets [21]. They contact victims, using deception to cover up their ages and sexual intentions [6]. Then they entice unknowing victims into meetings or stalk and abduct them [10]. Some news reports have suggested that law enforcement is facing an epidemic of these sex crimes perpetrated through a new medium by a new type of criminal [10]. Needless to say, these reports have raised fears about Internet use by children and adolescents and about the safety of specific online activities such as interacting online with unknown people, posting profiles containing pictures and personal information, and maintaining Web pages at social networking sites.

The reality about Internet-initiated sex crimes—those in which sex offenders meet juvenile victims online—is different, complex, and serious, but less archetypically frightening than the publicity about these crimes suggests. The purpose of this report is to provide an accurate, research-based description of this high-profile social problem and make recommendations for effective responses. We present an overview of research relating to Internet-initiated sex crimes, much of it conducted by the first author and her colleagues at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. We focus primarily on the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study. The N-JOV Study collected information from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about the prevalence of arrests for and characteristics of online sex crimes against minors during two 12 month periods: July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2001 (Wave 1) and calendar year 2006 (Wave 2).

Overall, our research [35-39] about Internet-initiated sex crimes indicates that the stereotype of the Internet “predator” is largely inaccurate. Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters. Most such offenders are charged with crimes, such as statutory rape, that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults. The statistics suggest that Internet-initiated sex crimes account for a salient, but small proportion of all statutory rape offenses and a relatively low number of the sexual offenses committed against minors overall. Specifically, crime report data suggest that 25% of the sex crimes committed against minors and reported to police involve statutory rape [33]. Online relationships accounted for about 7% of arrests for statutory rape in 2000, and arrests of online predators in 2006 constituted about 1% of all arrests for sex crimes committed against children and youth [38].

PROFILES OF A RELATIONSHIP INITIATED BY AN ONLINE SEXUAL PREDATOR

Online child molesters use online communications to establish trust and confidence in their victims, who typically are adolescents, by introducing talk of sex, and then arranging to meet youth in person for sexual encounters [38]. In 89% of cases with face-to-face meetings, offenders had sexual intercourse, oral sex, or another form of penetrative sex with victims. Only 5% of meetings involved violent offenses, mostly rape or attempted rape, while 16% involved coercion (i.e., victim was pressured into having sex or doing sexual things that they did not want to do), not all of which happened during the first meeting [38].

Some victims (40%) who attended face-to-face meetings were given illegal drugs or alcohol, exposed to adult or child pornography (23% and 15%, respectively), or photographed in sexual poses (21%). A few cases (3%) involved brief abductions that happened in the course of sexual assaults, and 29% of victims who attended face-to-face meetings with offenders were reported missing to police. Investigators described 24% of victims involved in face-to-face meetings as runaways. Another 5% who were reported missing had lied about their whereabouts to their parents, often claiming to be spending a night or a weekend with a friend [38].

Most offenders took time to develop relationships with victims. Investigators described victims in half of the cases as being in love with or having feelings of close friendship toward offenders. Sixty-four percent communicated online with victims for more than one month prior to meeting the victim; 79% had telephone conversations; 48% sent pictures online to victims; and 47% sent or offered gifts or money. Gifts ranged from small tokens like jewelry and teddy bears to items like clothing, cell phones, and digital cameras [38].

Because some youth victims feel love and allegiance toward offenders, they may also feel victimized by authorities and parents and may blame them for any stigma or embarrassment they experience. They may also not wish to cooperate with law enforcement or mental health providers [37].

Nonetheless, romantic and sexual involvements with adults during early and mid-adolescence are associated with a range of negative outcomes [14, 24] and may result in neglect of other important developmental tasks, such as academic performance [40]. Research has linked high teen pregnancy rates to youth who have sex with older partners [7, 8]. Young adolescents with older partners also have high rates of coerced intercourse [19]. Finally, early sexual activity itself is related to a variety of risk behaviors, from unprotected sex with multiple partners to substance abuse and delinquency [27, 40]. These bode ill for youth in terms of mental health and academic achievement [40].

Furthermore, the trauma of some may be compounded by an awareness that sexual pictures of themselves may be circulating online, if they complied with perpetrators’ requests to send or have provocative pictures taken of them [36].

In the next section, we outline two case examples that provide a window into the profiles of these types of relationships initiated by online sexual predators.

CRIMES BY ONLINE PREDATORS: CASE EXAMPLES

Case #1. Police in a West Coast state found child pornography in the possession of the 22-year-old offender. The offender, who was from a Northeastern state, confessed to befriending a 13-year-old local boy online, travelling to the West Coast, and meeting him for sex. Prior to the meeting, the offender and victim had corresponded online for about six months. The offender had sent the victim nude images via webcam and e-mail and they had called and texted each other hundreds of times. When they met for sex, the offender took graphic pictures of the encounter. The victim believed he was in love with the offender. He lived alone with his father and was struggling to fit in and come to terms with being gay. The offender possessed large quantities of child pornography that he had downloaded from the Internet. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison [38].

Case #2. A 24-year-old man met a 14-year-old girl at a social networking site. He claimed to be 19. Their online conversation became romantic and sexual, and the victim believed she was in love. They met several times for sex over a period of weeks. The offender took nude pictures of the victim and gave her alcohol and drugs. Her mother and stepfather found out and reported the crime to the police. The victim was lonely, had issues with drugs and alcohol, and problems at school and with her parents. She had posted provocative pictures of herself on her social networking site. She had met other men online and had sex with them. The offender was a suspect in another online enticement case. He was found guilty but had not been sentenced at time of the interview [38].

ARE INTERNET-INITIATED SEX CRIMES INCREASING?

Figure 1 presents information on the change over time in online predator arrests between our two survey years of 2000 and 2006.

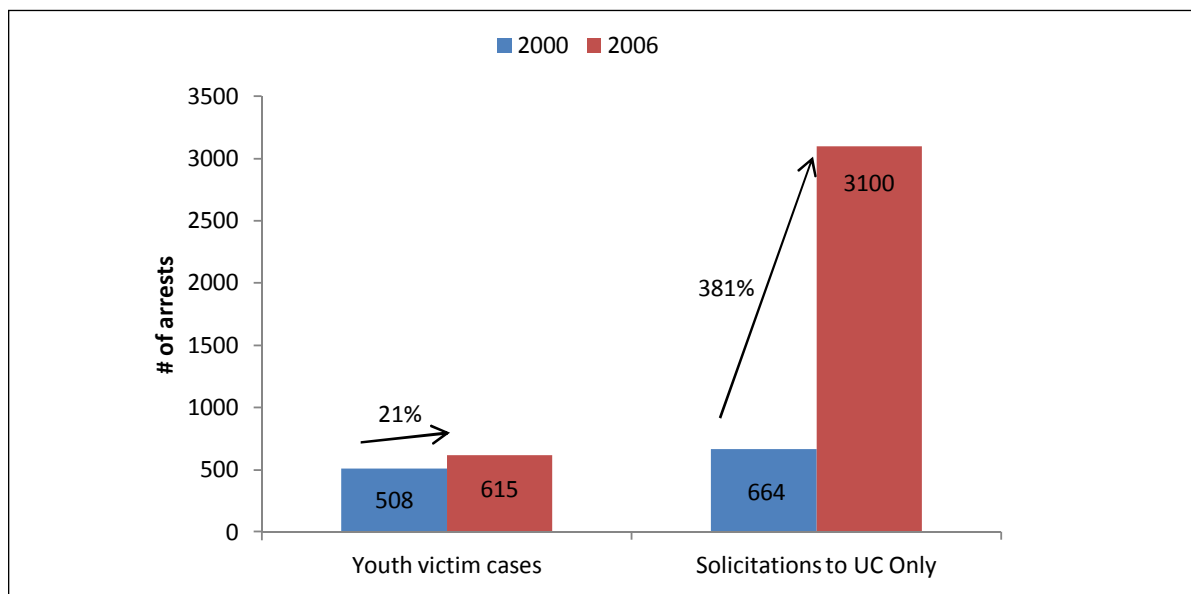


Figure 1: Online predator arrests from 2000 to 2006

As shown, arrests for Internet-initiated sex crimes against children increased 21% in that time period [38]. However, it is important to note that between 2000 and 2006, the percentage of U.S. youth Internet users ages 12-17 also increased from 73% to 93% [17, 18]. Moreover, between 2000 and 2006, there was a 381% increase in arrests of offenders who solicited undercover investigators posing as youth; in fact, in 2006, of those arrested for soliciting online, 87% solicited undercover investigators and 13% solicited youth [38].

Thus, although arrests of online predators are increasing, the facts do not suggest that the Internet is facilitating an epidemic of sex crimes against youth. Rather, increasing arrests for online predation probably reflect increasing rates of youth Internet use, a migration of crime from offline to online venues, and the growth of law enforcement activity against online crimes. In addition, the nature of crimes in which sex offenders used the Internet to meet and victimize youth changed little between 2000 and 2006 [38], despite the advent of social networking sites, as shown by Figure 2.

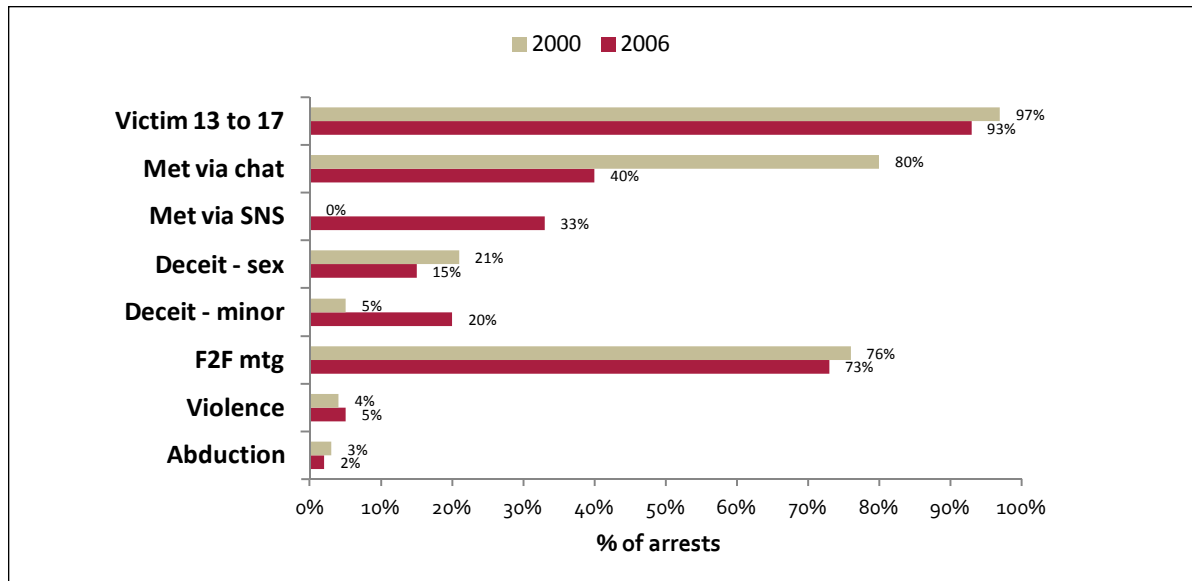


Figure 2: Characteristics of crimes committed by online predators, 2000 to 2006

WHO IS AT RISK FOR VICTIMIZATION?

Almost all victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes were 13 to 17 years old. About half were 13 or 14 years old [36]. This age profile is different from conventional offline child molestation which includes a large proportion of victims younger than age 12 [11, 29].

Although online molesters take advantage of developmentally normal adolescent interests in romance and sex, some youth characteristics and online activities increase the likelihood that youth will receive online sexual solicitations, which in some cases lead to sexual victimization. These characteristics and online activities include boys who are gay or questioning their sexual orientations; youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, or other troubled youth; youth with poor relationships with their parents; and youth who frequent chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior [36].

Boys who are gay or questioning. When boys are victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes, virtually all of their offenders are male [36]. Hostility and social stigma toward homosexuality [32, 34], as well as feelings of isolation and loneliness [20, 30], may impair the ability of boys who identify as gay or questioning to form age-appropriate intimate relationships. Concerns about confidentiality can also limit these boys' willingness to get information about sexual matters from trusted adults [9]. For these reasons, some gay boys turn to the Internet to find answers to questions about sexuality or meet potential romantic partners, and there they may encounter adults who exploit them.

Youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, and other troubled youth. Abused youth are more at risk for sexual victimization and exploitation in a variety of ways [12, 27]. Abuse history could make some youth less able to assess inappropriate sexual advances [4, 28]. Some may be vulnerable to online sexual

advances because they are looking for attention and affection [16]. For some, prior abuse may trigger risky sexual behavior that directly invites online sexual advances. Moreover, delinquency, depression, and social interaction problems unrelated to abuse also may increase vulnerability. Adolescents of both sexes who are troubled with depression and related problems are more likely than other youth to form close online relationships with people they meet online [35].

Youth with poor relationships with parents. Adolescent girls who report a high degree of conflict with their parents and boys who report low parental monitoring are more likely than other youth to form close online relationships with people they meet online [35].

Youth who visit chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior. There is overlap between youth who visit chatrooms and the previously mentioned risk factors, in that adolescents who visit chatrooms are more likely to have problems with their parents; to suffer from sadness, loneliness, or depression; to have histories of sexual abuse; and to engage in risky behavior than those who do not visit chatrooms [3, 31]. Youth who are lonely, shy, or lacking in social skills may interact with others in chatrooms to compensate for problems they have forming friendships offline [26]. Thus, it is not surprising that visiting chatrooms is a risk factor for online sexual solicitations. In fact, about one third of youth who received online sexual solicitations in 2006 had received them in chatrooms [41].

Other online behaviors also increase risk for online sexual solicitations. Youth who send personal information (e.g., name, telephone number, pictures) to unknown people or talk online to such people about sex are more likely to receive aggressive sexual solicitations—i.e., those that involve actual or attempted offline contact [23]. Overall, as the number of different online risk behaviors increases (see Table 1), so do the odds of online victimization [42]. Specifically, youth who engage in three or four different types of these online behaviors are 5 and 11 times more likely to report online sexual solicitation or harassment, respectively, than those who do not.

Online Risk Factor	% of Youth Engaging in it
Posting personal information online	56%
Interacting online with unknown people	43%
Having unknown people on a buddy list	35%
Using the Internet to make rude and nasty comments to others	28%
Sending personal information to unknown people met online	26%
Downloading images from file-sharing programs	15%
Visiting X-rated sites on purpose	13%
Using the Internet to embarrass or harass people youth are mad at	9%
Talking online to unknown people about sex	5%

Table 1: Online Risk Factors and the Percentage of Youth Who Engage in them

Source: Ybarra et al., 2007

Of youth Internet users ages 10 to 17, 15% were high-risk interactors who communicated online with unknown people and engaged in at least four of the other behaviors on the above list [37].

WHO ARE THE OFFENDERS?

Although there is little research about the characteristics of online sexual predators, they appear to occupy a restricted range on the spectrum of the sex offender population and include few true pedophiles or violent or sadistic offenders [36]. Figure 3 presents the demographic and other histories of the men arrested in both our 2000 and 2006 surveys [38].

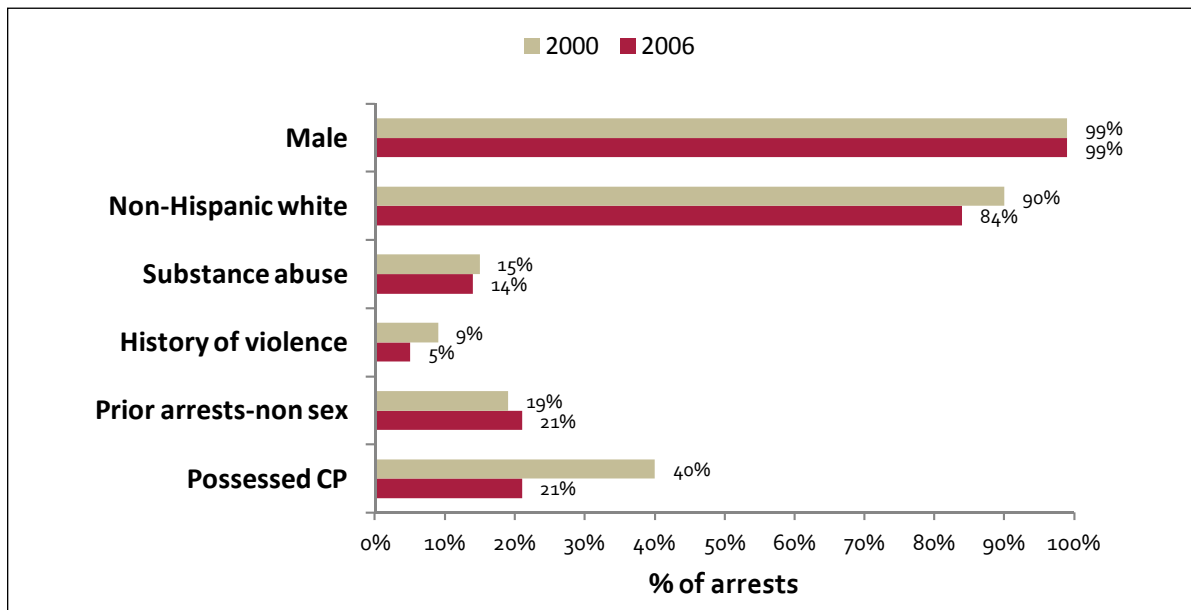


Figure 3: The characteristics of online predators, 2000 to 2006

Because online child molesters primarily target adolescents, not young children [38], such offenders do not fit the clinical profile of pedophiles, who are, by definition, sexually attracted to prepubescent children [1].

Nunez suggested several possible motivations among adults who pursue sex with adolescents [25], which could apply to online molesters. They may seek admiration from victims who are sexually responsive but naive, want to relive adolescent experiences, be inhibited by fear of adult partners, or desire the power and control they can exert over youth. Adult men who seek adolescent girls in offline environments are more likely to have criminal histories, less education, feelings of inadequacy, and arrested psychosocial development [15]. These offline offenders may be different from online child molesters, however. Some online child molesters may be primarily sexually attracted to adults but target adolescents for reasons that include impulse, curiosity, anger, or desire for power [16].

Offenders caught by stings

One in eight offenders arrested in undercover operations had committed crimes against actual youth victims, which were discovered as a result of the undercover operation. Those who solicited undercover investigators were somewhat older and more middle class compared with those who solicited actual youth. They were also somewhat less likely to have prior arrests for sexual offenses against minors or for nonsexual offenses, or to have histories of violence or deviant sexual behavior. However, both groups had equally high rates of child pornography possession (about 40%) and rates of substance abuse (about 15%) [38].

WHAT IS BEING AND CAN BE DONE

Over the six years between the two studies, we saw considerable law enforcement mobilization in response to online predators; there has been a marked increase in arrests of those who would try to use the Internet to recruit minors for sexual activity.

Most of these arrests have occurred through the use of undercover decoys posing online as young adolescents. Our earlier evaluation of this law enforcement activity suggested that overall this was being carried out responsibly by specially trained officers in multiagency operations, and that it had resulted in conviction rates as high as or higher than other sex crime investigations [22]. Given the overall declines in sex crimes against minors and in the absence of evidence that police authority is being abused, we are inclined to see this as a sign of a successful initiative to deploy law enforcement in a domain where criminal sexual activities may be migrating, as well as the successful adaptation of new technology to improve police effectiveness.

Prevention should also be targeted to the general audience of adolescents [2]. Because one quarter of the victims were 13-year-olds, these prevention discussions need to start in earliest adolescence [36]. One avenue is to educate teenagers directly about why such relationships are a bad idea. Young teens may not be fully aware that the adults in these relationships are committing crimes and can go to jail. They have probably not considered the publicity, embarrassment, and life disruption likely to accompany a public revelation of such a relationship. They may benefit from understanding the manipulations that adult offenders engage in, and from understanding that adults who care about their well-being would not propose sexual relationships or involve them in risky encounters. They should be informed of why such romances end quickly, even when not discovered, and how frequently the offenders have other partners. They should know that corresponding with adults trolling for teenage partners can encourage offenders and endanger other youth, even when relationships are confined to the Internet. They need to be told bluntly that any sexual pictures they pose for may end up on the Internet or as evidence in a courtroom [36].

WHAT IS BEING AND CAN BE DONE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Most of these relationships fall under statutory rape laws. Massachusetts has set guidelines as to what is considered statutory rape and appropriate punishment based on the age of both parties involved and whether the adult is a repeat offender (Part 5, Title 1, Chapter 265, Section 23). Massachusetts has also enacted laws to protect minors from violent or obvious threats to safety that take place either on- or off-line including protection from sex offenders, forced or unsolicited sex, and criminal harassment. Finally, there are laws tailored to online or media interactions that protect victims against criminal harassment if that harassment causes significant distress. Thus, Massachusetts is clearly focused on protecting children from sex offenders and threats that exist both on- and off-line.

There are some bills currently in the legislature that relate to this issue of online predators, which includes H.2405 (2011): An Act creating a task force to study the use of the internet by sex offenders. This bill proposes to create a task force to report on electronic communications and the feasibility of tracking sex offender internet use, via methods including but not limited to: (1) internet protocol addresses, (2) media access control addresses, (3) internet service providers, (4) electronic mail, and (5) instant messaging. The task force's study shall address, but not be limited to, the following areas: (1) current laws and regulations; (2) other states laws, regulations, and efforts; (3) the feasibility of registration of sex offenders' online addresses; and (4) relevant civil liberties issues.

Related to this bill, our 2006 study found that only 4% of online predators arrested for crimes against youth victims were registered sex offenders, as were 2% of those arrested for soliciting undercover investigators [38]. Thus, policies targeted at registered sex offenders are aimed at a very small part of the problem. *Internet safety needs to be designed with the assumption that most online predators are not registered offenders and have no prior record.* Thus, other mechanisms for deterring this behavior need to be designed.

Victims are most often at-risk youth who have previously been abused or already have problems in school or at home. The connection between at-risk youth and online activity has yet to be recognized in legislation. S.981 proposes the opening of five teen drop-in centers, where teens can go to seek free and confidential mental health services and access to information and support groups for whatever it is they are going through. This bill is geared toward giving youth a safe place to seek information about mental health or other issues and does not directly address the issue of at-risk youth and online predators, but it can provide at-risk youth a safety net and social support network that steers them away from risky online behavior.

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