

Morning News

Teen survey shows decrease in online sexual solicitations

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NEW YORK -- Fewer youths are receiving sexual solicitations over the Internet as they become smarter about where they hang out and with whom they communicate online, researchers said Wednesday.

The findings, from a telephone-based survey sponsored by the government-funded National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, run counter to recent media reports and congressional hearings suggesting a growing danger of online predators as more youths turn to social-networking sites like MySpace.com.

"It may be signs people are paying (attention) to warnings they receive about online dangers," said Janis Wolak, one of the study's authors and a professor at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. "They are being more cautious about who they are interacting with online."

But the study found that aggressive solicitations --

the ones involving requests for contact by mail, by phone or in person -- remained steady compared with a similar study five years earlier. And the report found growth in online harassment and unwanted exposure to pornography.

The report defines solicitation broadly as any request to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or give personal sexual information -- as long as it was unwanted or came from an adult.

Not all requests were deemed by the youth as distressing.

In the latest study of online youths ages 10 to 17, conducted from March to June 2005 as MySpace began its rapid ascent, 13 percent of respondents reported a sexual solicitation, compared with 19 percent in a 1999-2000 survey. In both studies, about 4 percent reported aggressive solicitations.

Many of the contacts came from other teens rather than adults, and few rose to the level of predation, the survey found.

"A significant portion of what they are calling sexual solicitation is merely teens being teens," said Nancy Willard, an online safety expert who helps schools develop programs and who was not involved in the study.

She said the drop should demonstrate to parents and policymakers that "the dangers are real but they are not as significant as they have been hyped in recent months."

Parents, school administrators and law-enforcement authorities have been increasingly warning of online predators at sites like MySpace, whose youth-oriented visitors are encouraged to expand their circles of friends through messaging tools and personal profile pages.

Lawmakers have responded by trying to restrict access to MySpace and other social-networking sites from schools and libraries that receive certain federal funds. A bill the House overwhelmingly passed last month is pending in the Senate.

Driven largely by word of mouth, MySpace has grown astronomically since its launch in January 2004 and is now the second-busiest site in the United States, according to comScore Media Metrix. The site, owned by News Corp., registered its

100 millionth user Wednesday; about 20 percent are registered as minors, according to the company.

MySpace's usage was much smaller when the latest survey was conducted, but Wolak said she did not believe the conclusions would be different today. She said solicited kids had been engaging with strangers the same way, be it through a chat room, instant messaging or a social-networking site.

"People have fears that these crimes involve offenders and predators who look at these (social-networking) sites and then seek to identify these kids," Wolak said. "That's not really what's going on."

Researchers did find that in more than a quarter of the solicitations, youths were asked to submit sexual photographs of themselves, some of which may be a crime under federal child-pornography laws.

In general, youths responded to solicitations simply by leaving a Web site, blocking solicitors or ignoring them. Relatively few incidents, however, were reported to law enforcement or school administrators.

The survey of 1,500 children who had used the Internet at least once a month during the previous six months has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. Nearly 55,000 households were reached to find enough participants.