



UNH report: Technology alone can't protect minors from online sex predators

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Article published Jan 26, 2009

DOVER — A year after popular social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook agreed to a series of technical restrictions aimed at protecting children from online predators, a national report released Wednesday that relied heavily on research by the University of New Hampshire cautions against an overreliance on technology to address the problem.

The report, "Enhancing Child Safety and Online Technologies," also found the risks children face online are "not significantly different than those they face offline, and that as they get older, minors themselves contribute to some of the problems."

The report was compiled by a task force that included Internet service providers, social networking sites, and child safety organizations. UNH's Crimes against Children Research Center contributed about two-thirds of the research used in the report, according to Director David Finkelhor.

The report was presented during the fifth annual "State of the Net" conference Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

Last month, the report was reviewed by dozens of attorneys general across the country.

It found that some of the steps taken by social networking sites, such as setting up forums for high school students only and prohibiting registered sex offenders from using the sites, "are helpful in mitigating some risks to minors online, but none is fail-safe."

To complement the use of technology, greater resources should be allocated to education initiatives for schools, libraries, law enforcement, and social service organizations, the report stated.

"Our basic view is that the problem is not there are sex offenders who can see children and write them," Finkelhor said. "I'm not really sure technical solutions and attempts to restrict who can communicate with whom will be all that effective ... the notion that somehow you create a "children's ghetto" — and that's what protects children — is based on a misunderstanding of the dynamics of this crime."

He added, "The key issue has to do with making sure children know how to deflect overtures."

That can be achieved mainly through education, he said. Making children aware of online predators needs to be part of their "life curriculum" taught by parents and teachers, he said. The report emphasized sociological and family-related issues tend to be bigger risk factors for children who fall victim to Internet predators than the social networking sites themselves.

Finkelhor said based on data from 2002, about 1,000 people a year are arrested for the sexual solicitation of minors. He added with the rise in popularity of social networking sites, that number has probably risen in recent years.

In December, MySpace attracted about 70 million visitors to its site, compared with 50 million who visited Facebook in the same month, according to ComScore, a global website tracking firm.

New Hampshire Attorney General Kelly Ayotte said that while the report was an important step forward in identifying how to combat online predators, it relied on "outdated and inadequate research that downplayed the effects of child predators."

"The task force report is one piece of information, but I don't want people to be left with the impression that there is not a problem," Ayotte said. "Unfortunately, we still see cases here in New Hampshire and across the country where children are being solicited."

The state's last high-profile case involved 28-year-old Craig Marcotte, of Manchester, who police say sexually assaulted a 14-year-old boy he met on MySpace. Marcotte was arrested last April.

In a prepared statement, Hemanshu Nigam, MySpace's chief security officer, said the site has implemented more than 100 safety measures in the last two years, including: reviewing images for inappropriate content, checking discussion groups, removing registered sex offenders, enforcing age requirements, limiting contact between adults and minors, and collaborating with law enforcement on safety and education.

Chris Kelly, Facebook's chief privacy officer, said in a statement the site has added privacy rules limiting the amount of information available through searches and used technology to track "anomalous" behavior.

Ayotte said multiple state laws regarding the online abuse of minors have been updated to include computer-related incidents. Indecent exposure, for example, now includes images sent over the Internet.

She added online predators remain a "very real" concern.

"It's not a problem that's going to be solved by any one group," she said. "It has to be a concerted effort."