

## UNH professor talks to Congress about online predators, sex crimes 7.25.07

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DURHAM — The majority of online sex crime victims are not children, but rather teenagers who are well aware of the age and sexual intentions of the offender, according to a University of New Hampshire professor.

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at UNH, testified before Congress Tuesday that the public's perception of Internet pedophiles tricking children into revealing personal information and then stalking or abducting them is false. Most Internet sex crimes begin with weeks of explicit conversations that exploit a teen's sexual curiosity and desire for romance and adventure, according to Finkelhor.

"These are not mostly violent sex crimes but criminal seductions that take advantage of common teenage vulnerabilities," he said.

In his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Finkelhor said that 73 percent of underage victims met offenders multiple times for multiple sexual encounters, and that in half of the cases, police described the victim as being in love or feeling a close relationship with the offender. One quarter of victims also ran away from home to be with the offender.

Finkelhor added that deception was not a factor in

most cases. He said that only 5 percent of offenders concealed their age and that in 80 percent of the crimes, the adults were explicit about their sexual intentions.

Finkelhor said that victims are often troubled youths with histories of family turmoil and physical and sexual abuse. He said that children are at risk when they are willing to talk about sex online with strangers or interact with people on sex sites and in chat rooms.

As an example, Finkelhor detailed the case of a 13-year-old girl from a divorced family who had met with a 45-year-old man for multiple sexual encounters in motel rooms. He said that the relationship began when the computer-savvy teen entered sex-oriented chat rooms and began conversing with the man, who flattered her, engaged in intimate conversations, and gave her gifts and jewelry. At the time of the man's arrest, the girl resisted cooperating with police.

"To prevent these crimes, we have to take on more awkward and complicated topics and start with an acceptance of the fact that some teens are curious about sex and looking for romance and adventure," Finkelhor said.

He said that prevention efforts should focus on educating teens about drawbacks of a sexual

relationship with an adult, such as jail, bad press, and public embarrassment, and use strategies that are effective for communicating with teenagers.

"Like discouraging kids from smoking or drinking, the simple scare tactics often don't work. This challenge too may require deft maneuvering within the teenage psychology to get the message to stick," he said.

Finkelhor added that law enforcement agencies should receive training on how to work with teenage victims and develop new ways for teens to report come-ons and sexual picture requests.

Last week, the Crimes Against Children Research Center announced that one in 25 youth Internet users received a request for a sexual picture of themselves during the last year.

Researchers at UNH also found that only 5 percent of online sex crimes against children involved violence when meetings occurred, and that only 3 percent included an abduction.

The center's research included data from hundreds of national cases as well as two sample surveys of youth Internet users.