



## **Study rejects Internet sex predator stereotype**

**By Julie Steenhuysen**

2/18/08

CHICAGO - The typical online sexual predator is not someone posing as a teen to lure unsuspecting victims into face-to-face meetings that result in violent rapes, U.S. researchers said on Monday.

Rather, they tend to be adults who make their intentions of a sexual encounter quite plain to vulnerable young teens who often believe they are in love with the predator, they said.

And contrary to the concerns of parents and state attorneys general, they found social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace do not appear to expose teens to greater risks.

"A lot of the characterizations that you see in Internet safety information suggests that sex offenders are targeting very young children and using violence and deception against their victims," said Janis Wolak of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

"Especially since social networking sites became popular, people are suggesting that these offenders are using information to stalk and abduct their victims," said Wolak, whose study appears in the journal *American Psychologist*.

"We are not seeing those types of cases," Wolak said in a telephone interview.

Instead, she said most cases arise from risky online interactions such as talking online about sex to strangers.

"The great majority of cases we have seen involved young teenagers, mostly 13-, 14-, 15-year-old girls who are targeted by adults on the Internet who are straightforward about being interested in sex," she said.

The study was based on telephone interviews with 3,000 Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17 done in 2000 and again in 2005. The researchers also conducted more than 600 interviews with federal, state and local law enforcement officials in the United States.

They also combed through data from similar studies.

They found Internet offenders pretended to be teenagers in only 5 percent of the crimes studied. They also found nearly 75 percent of victims who met their offenders in person did so on more than one occasion.

Wolak said Internet predators use instant messages, e-mail and chat rooms to meet and develop intimate relationships with their victims. "From the perspective of the victim, these are romances," she said.

Wolak said teens who engaged in risky online behaviors -- having buddy lists that included strangers, discussing sex online with strangers, being rude online -- were much more likely to be targeted.

"One of the big factors we found is that offenders target kids who are willing to talk to them online. Most kids are not," Wolak said.

U.S. state attorneys general have been working with privately held Facebook and NewsCorp's MySpace to protect users from registered sex offenders.

But Wolak said it is important for parents and children to have a clear picture of who these predators are.

"If everybody is looking for violent predators lurking in the bushes, kids who are involved in these relationships aren't going to be seeing what is happening to them as a crime," she said.

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