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Harvard study: For teens MySpace might be safer than you think

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Social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook may put youngsters' private lives in a fishbowl, but there's no concrete evidence that the increased visibility makes them more prone to sexual predators, according to a study released Wednesday.

"It doesn't look like just because kids are more accessible on social networking sites, that poses a lot of risk," said David Finkelhor, director of Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, who helped prepare the report.

The findings run counter to a growing view that the Internet and social networking sites are dangerous places for teens, inviting predators into their daily lives.

Harvard University's Berkman Center For Internet and Society released the results Wednesday of a one-year study by the Internet Safety Technical Task Force. Participants included representatives from MySpace, Facebook and the Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

While playing down the online threat of sexual predation, which drew the concern of some law enforcement officials, the task force labeled cyber bullying as the most common abuse. The study found that the sites provide an additional forum for existing negative peer relationships among young people.

That aspect of the report earned praise from area legislators who have grappled with how to deal with cyber bullying, particularly in the wake of a Dardenne Prairie teen suicide tied to cyber harassment.

"We knew this was a major issue, and that's why we decided to proceed," said Missouri Sen. Scott Rupp, R-Wentzville, who helped engineer state legislation on cyber stalking and harassment. "Everyone is starting to understand that it is a problem."

In 2007, 13-year-old Megan Meier killed herself hours after she learned that an online boyfriend on MySpace had been created by an adult as a hoax. Meier learned the boy was fictitious after she received numerous cruel messages from peers and others who were in on the hoax.

The report's findings on sexual predators aren't sitting well with area investigators of cyber crimes against children.

"They are underestimating the aggressive nature of the adult sex offender," said Lt. Joe Laramie, a Glendale police officer who also directs the Clayton-based Missouri Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. "It puts out the message that it's not as bad as you are told and my fear is that people will minimize it and say this isn't really that bad."

The 29-member task force that did the study was formed at the behest of a national network of state attorneys general who are seeking stronger ways to confront cyber bullying, online predators and other abuses to youths on websites. The group was asked to focus on technological advances to better monitor sites and protect children.

The task force was assisted by a research team that culled available studies on Internet usage, teens, predation and

crime, and also compared that research with general trends and statistics about crimes against children. The researchers argued that there hasn't been enough study of social networking in general. Some, like Finkelhor, went as far as to suggest that the risk of becoming a victim of a sexual predator could be the same whether a youth uses the Internet or not.

"The jury is still out on it," he said.

Attorneys general were generally positive about the report's emphasis on the technological advances for Internet safety, but some felt the conclusions might cause a setback.

"The report unfortunately downplays the threat of predators — in relying on research that is outdated or inadequate — and it fails to provide specific plans to implement technology in improving social networking safety," said Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, in a written response to the study.

But child crime researchers like Finkelhor maintain that current studies aren't showing that the sites increase the general threat to youths who aren't already at-risk or already engaging in dangerous behaviors.

Finkelhor has previously presented research arguing that crimes against children have decreased dramatically over the last decade, yet parents grow increasingly afraid for their children over statistically rare occurrences such as child abduction.

In the new study, Finkelhor noted that there's also no evidence that bullying, though the most common abuse on Internet sites, has increased among teen peers because of social networking sites.

Bullying is still far more common offline than online, but the sites provide another outlet for existing negative peer interactions, the study found.

Even so, the study concluded that more work needs to be done in the area of protecting youths from cyber bullying as well as educating parents, educators, law enforcement and others about high-risk youths who are likely to be solicited or may be more willing to engage in sexual activities with adults, the study said.

The task force consisted of representatives from Internet businesses, technology firms, academics and other areas.

Laramie said he was disturbed that no law enforcement officials were on the task force to guide discussion on technology needs.

The study made no mention of the hot-button debate over the retention of Internet protocol — IP — addresses of Internet users, Laramie said. Those addresses, which can allow investigators to trace Internet postings to local area providers and provide critical clues to user identities, are rarely saved by service providers, he said.

"We've asked repeatedly that electronic service providers retain IP addresses for a minimum of six months," Laramie said. "That's not even addressed in this document."

The report cited several ongoing studies on Internet usage and illicit sexual solicitation, noting that those encounters have decreased significantly even as Internet usage among teens has drastically increased.

Researchers said there hasn't been enough study of consensual sex between minors and adults that was preceded by contact on social networking sites. The study further argued that, although predators are of serious concern, "the

image presented by the media of an older male deceiving and preying on a young child does not paint an accurate picture of the nature of the majority of sexual solicitations."