

Internet-predator concerns overblown, researchers say

By Frank Greve
McClatchy Newspapers
2/19/08

WASHINGTON -- A lot of parental worries about Internet sex predators are unjustified, according to new research by a leading center that studies crimes against children.

"There's been some overreaction to the new technology, especially when it comes to the danger that strangers represent," said Janis Wolak, a sociologist at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

"Actually, Internet-related sex crimes are a pretty small proportion of sex crimes that adolescents suffer," Wolak added, based on three nationwide surveys conducted by the center.

Two of the surveys contacted 3,000 Internet users aged 10-17 in 2000 and again in 2005. The third sums up findings from 612 interviews with investigators at a nationally representative sample of agencies that deal with Internet sex crimes involving children.

In an article titled "Online 'Predators' and Their Victims," which appears today in *American Psychologist*, the journal of the American Psychological Association, Wolak and co-researchers examined several fears that they concluded are myths:

- Internet predators are driving up child-sex-crime rates.

Finding: Sex assaults on teens fell 52 percent from 1993 to 2005, according to the Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey, the best measure of U.S. crime trends.

"The Internet may not be as risky as a lot of other things that parents do without concern, such as driving kids to the mall and leaving them there for two hours," Wolak said.

- Internet predators are pedophiles.

Finding: Internet predators don't hit on the prepubescent children whom pedophiles target. They target adolescents, who have more access to computers, more privacy and more interest in sex and romance, Wolak's team determined from interviews with investigators.

- Internet predators represent a new dimension of child sexual abuse.

Finding: The means of communication is new, according to Wolak, but most Internet-linked offenses are essentially statutory rape: nonforcible sex crimes against minors too young to consent to sexual relationships with adults.

- Internet predators trick or abduct their victims.

Finding: Most victims meet online offenders face to face and go to those meetings expecting to engage in sex. Nearly three-quarters have sex with partners they met on the Internet more than once.

- Internet predators meet their victims by posing online as other teens.

Finding: Only 5 percent of predators did that, according to the survey of investigators.

- Internet predators go after any child.

Finding: Usually their targets are adolescent girls or adolescent boys of uncertain sexual orientation, according to Wolak. Youths with histories of sexual abuse, sexual-orientation concerns and patterns of off- and online risk-taking are especially at risk.

Copyright © 2008 The Seattle Times Company