

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Internet-initiated Sex Crimes against Minors: Implications for Prevention Based on Findings from a National Study

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Purpose: To describe the characteristics of episodes in which juveniles became victims of sex crimes committed by people they met through the Internet.

Methods: A national survey of a stratified random sample of 2574 law enforcement agencies conducted between October 2001 and July 2002. Telephone interviews were conducted with local, state, and federal law enforcement investigators concerning 129 sexual offenses against juvenile victims that originated with online encounters.

Results: Victims in these crimes were primarily 13-through 15-year-old teenage girls (75%) who met adult offenders (76% older than 25) in Internet chat rooms. Most offenders did not deceive victims about the fact that they were adults who were interested in sexual relationships. Most victims met and had sex with the adults on more than one occasion. Half of the victims were described as being in love with or feeling close bonds with the offenders. Almost all cases with male victims involved male offenders. Offenders used violence in 5% of the episodes.

Conclusions: Health care professionals and educators, parents and media need to be aware of the existence, nature and real life dynamics of these online relationships among adolescents. Information about Internet safety should include frank discussion about why these relationships are inappropriate, criminal, and detrimental to the developmental needs of youth. © *Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 2004

KEY WORDS:

Internet
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Many young people who use the Internet encounter sexual overtures [1]. Advising families and young people about how to avoid these overtures and how to handle them when they occur has become a new responsibility of health-care professionals, health educators, and child welfare experts. In the absence of more scientific sources, professionals have had to rely on media reports, which have focused attention on Internet-related sex crimes, particularly those involving young victims who meet offenders online. These media descriptions of Internet-initiated sex offenses against young people have emphasized their predatory nature, stressing how the Internet facilitates deception. Internet molesters have been portrayed as pedophiles who, pretending to be peers or benevolent adults, strike up relationships with children and then stalk or lure them into encounters that end in abduction, rape, or even murder.

This has led to prevention messages that advise youth not to correspond online with strangers, give out identifying information, or go alone to meet individuals they have met only online. Beyond the fact that this advice is widely ignored and seen as unrealistic by many young people [1,2], there are also questions about the accuracy of this characterization of sex offenses that occur as a result of Internet meetings. Basing prevention recommendations on media accounts of egregious crimes can lead to misguided public policy. Sex crime dangers have

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been particularly prone to mischaracterization [3,4], leading, for example, to an under-emphasis on the roles of family members, acquaintances and other youth in the commission of these offenses.

Also, these standard prevention messages seem to be crafted without taking into account much of what is known about youth social life and Internet practices. In fact, most adolescents who use the Internet converse online, at least casually, with people they haven't met face-to-face; many form online friendships that become offline friendships; and most of these friendships are with other youth [5,6]. Also, some youth form online relationships with adults that appear to be benign or even beneficial [6]. At the same time, one study has demonstrated that youth were more likely to form online friendships or romances if they were troubled or, depending on gender, had high levels of conflict or low levels of communication with parents [7]. Adolescents with these sorts of problems may be more vulnerable to online victimization.

We designed the present study to examine the characteristics of sex crime victims, ages 17 and younger, who met sex offenders on the Internet and the dynamics of those crimes in an effort to provide a systematic and scientifically based description of Internet-initiated sex offenses committed against young people in the United States. We addressed several questions: (a) What were the demographic characteristics of the victims and offenders? (b) Where and how did online relationships arise? (c) What was the role of deception? (d) How did face-to-face meetings develop? (e) What kinds of sex crimes occurred and how often were violence, coercion or abduction involved?

Methods

The National Juvenile Online Victimization Study used a national survey of federal, state, county, and local law enforcement agencies to collect data about Internet-related sex crimes with juvenile victims. We surveyed law enforcement agencies because the incidence of completed Internet-related sex crimes with juvenile victims is too small to use moderate-sized general population surveys [6] and because law enforcement agencies, as "first responders" to these crimes, have more complete information than other sources, like medical and mental health care providers. Cases were eligible for the study if they were Internet-related, had victims under the age of 18, and involved arrests made between July 1, 2000 and June 30, 2001.

We used a two-phase methodology of a mail survey followed by telephone interviews. We adapted this data collection strategy from a similar methodology developed to investigate the incidence and characteristics of stereotypical child abduction cases [8,9].

Phase 1 Mail Survey Sample

In the first phase, we sent mail surveys to a national sample of 2574 state, county, and local law enforcement agencies. We created a stratified sample, dividing law enforcement agencies into three sampling frames based on their specialization or training in investigating Internet sex crimes against minors, so we could get information from agencies that specialized in these crimes and still allow every agency in the country a chance to be selected in the sample. The *first frame* consisted of 79 specialized agencies mandated to investigate Internet sex crimes against minors, including 32 state and local agencies comprising 30 federally funded Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) regional Task Forces, 43 federally funded ICAC satellites and four federal agencies, two of which ultimately participated. The *second frame* consisted of law enforcement agencies that we considered more likely than other agencies to have investigated Internet sex crimes against minors because their staff had received training about these types of cases. We identified 1668 trained agencies by using lists acquired from training programs. The *third frame* consisted of all other local, county, and state law enforcement agencies across the United States, a total of 13,586 agencies. The sample was drawn using an annually updated database of local, county, and state law enforcement agencies included in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports files or the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Directory of Law Enforcement Agencies. The agencies in the first and second frames were cross-referenced in the database to avoid duplication.

We included 100% of the first frame agencies, 50% of the second frame, and 12% of the third frame agencies in the sample. Decisions about sample construction were based on the number of agencies in the population of each frame, our expectation that many of the first and second frame agencies and few of the third frame agencies would have eligible cases to report, and practical considerations such as cost and processing time that limited our overall sample size. To maximize response rates, we followed an

Sampling Frames	Agencies in Population N	Agencies In Sample n (% population)	Eligible Agencies n (% population)	Agencies that Responded n (% eligible agencies)	Agencies with Internet-related Cases n (% eligible agencies)
First frame: Specialized agencies	→ 75	→ 75 (100%)	→ 75 (100%)	→ 62 (83%)	→ 48 (64%)
Second frame: Trained agencies	→ 1668	→ 833 (50%)	→ 822 (49%)*	→ 763 (93%)	→ 226 (27%)
Third frame: Other Agencies	→ 13,586	→ 1666 (12%)	→ 1612 (12%)**	→ 1380 (86%)	→ 109 (7%)
Total	→ 15,329	→ 2574 (17%)	→ 2509 (16%)	→ 2205 (88%)	→ 383 (15%)

Figure 1. Description of N-JOV stratified national sample and dispositions of mail survey. *Eleven agencies (1%) were ineligible because they lacked jurisdiction to investigate Internet sex crimes against minors. These were mostly small towns that relied on county or other agencies to conduct criminal investigations. **Fifty-four agencies (< 1%) were ineligible because they lacked jurisdiction to investigate Internet sex crimes against minors.

adapted version of the “total design” mail survey methodology [10]. We used first class mail to send surveys, personalized cover letters, and business reply envelopes to the heads of the agencies in the sample. Then, at intervals of between 2 and 4 weeks, we sent reminder postcards, followed by second and third mailings of the survey to the heads of agencies that had not responded. The overall response rate was 88% (see Figure 1).

Phase 2 Telephone Interview Sample

In response to the mail survey, 385 agencies reported a total of 1723 cases ending in arrests involving Internet sex crimes against minors. The second phase consisted of interviews with law enforcement investigators to gather information about case, offender, and victim characteristics.

We designed a sampling procedure that took into account the number of cases reported by an agency, so we would not unduly burden respondents in agencies with many cases. If an agency reported between one and three Internet-related cases, we conducted follow-up interviews for every case. Eighty-five percent of the responding agencies were in this group. For agencies that reported more than three cases, we conducted interviews for all cases that involved identified victims and sampled other

cases. (The term “identified” victims denotes victims that were identified and contacted by law enforcement in the course of the investigation.) For agencies with between 4 and 15 cases, approximately half of the cases that did not have identified victims were randomly selected for follow-up interviews. In agencies that reported more than 15 cases, approximately one-quarter of the cases with no identified victims were randomly selected. In some agencies, we could not find out which cases had identified victims, so we sampled from all cases, using the sampling procedure described above.

Telephone interviewers contacted and obtained consent from a key investigator or otherwise knowledgeable person for each case. Six trained interviewers completed 630 detailed telephone interviews between October 2001 and July 2002. Of the 1723 cases reported by law enforcement in response to the mail survey, 37% were not selected for the sample; and 16% of cases were ineligible (see Table 1). Ineligible sampled cases were not replaced in the sample because one study goal was to estimate annual numbers of arrests, for which we used statistical weighting procedures that required nonreplacement. The original 630 completed interviews were reduced to 612 cases after we determined that 18 interviews duplicated other completed interviews.

Table 1. Dispositions of N-JOV Telephone Interviews

Number of ...	1 st frame: Specialized Agencies ^a	2 nd frame: Trained Agencies	3 rd frame: Other Agencies	Total
Cases reported in mail surveys	999	545	179	1723
Not selected for sample	564 (56%)	58 (11%)	24 (13%)	646 (37%)
Ineligible ^b	73 (7%)	147 (27%)	61 (34%)	281 (16%)
Number of cases in sample	362	340	94	796
Nonresponders ^c	42 (12%)	50 (15%)	9 (9%)	101 (13%)
Refusals	13 (3%)	10 (3%)	2 (2%)	25 (3%)
Duplicate ^d and invalid cases	21 (6%)	14 (4%)	5 (5%)	40 (5%)
Completed interviews	286 (79%)	266 (78%)	78 (83%)	630 (79%)
Duplicate cases deleted ^e	11	6	1	18
Final number	275	260	77	612

Note: Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

^a Includes cases from federal agencies.

^b Cases did not meet eligibility requirements of study. In most cases, the arrest did not occur in the timeframe of the study.

^c Could not schedule interviews for various reasons.

^d Interviewers realized these were duplicate cases and did not conduct interviews.

^e Cases were determined to be duplicates after interviews were completed.

Subsample Used in this Study

Internet sex crimes against minors include a diverse range of offenses [11]. The group examined in this article comprises Internet-initiated cases, defined as cases in which offenders met identified victims online ($n = 129$). Seventy-three percent of these Internet-initiated offenses were completed crimes involving sexual assault or the production of child pornography. The remaining offenses were attempted crimes. We refer to the alleged perpetrators as "offenders," however, not all were convicted. At the time of data collection, 77% of offenders had pled guilty or been convicted; charges had been dropped against 4% and case outcomes were pending or unknown against 19%.

Instrumentation

The mail survey instrument asked if respondent agencies had made any arrests between July 1, 2000 and June 30, 2001 for crimes that involved the attempted or completed sexual exploitation of a minor in which the offender and victim first met on the Internet. It also screened for other types of Internet-related sex crimes. If respondents had such cases, we asked them to list the case numbers and the names of the investigating officers for each case they reported. The survey took about 5 minutes to complete for agencies that had no cases to report, but completion time varied for agencies with relevant cases.

The Phase 2 telephone interview instrument consisted of multiple sections, some of which were used in each interview and others whose use depended on the facts of the case. In the interviews about Internet-initiated cases, a Preliminary Section screened cases for eligibility, an Online Meeting Section collected information about the Internet-initiated crime, and Offender and Victim Sections gathered data about the demographic, family, emotional, and behavioral characteristics of the offender and victim. The interview included over 130 questions, many with sub-questions, but the numbers of questions used varied considerably based on the facts of each case. Most interviews took between 30 and 45 minutes to complete.

The interviewers attended a 2-day training session led by the researchers that provided extensive details about the background, purpose, and instrumentation of the study, and they participated in a series of practice and pilot interviews. The two chief researchers reviewed the data collection regularly to monitor for consistency.

The study was conducted with the approval of the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board and complied with confidentiality regulations mandated for research funded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Variables

We asked respondents to describe victims in terms of gender, age, race, household income and educational

level, and type of community. When we established that a crime involved a victim who met an offender over the Internet, we asked respondents a series of questions about the characteristics and dynamics of the crime, including offender characteristics; how the victim and offender met online; whether the offender was deceptive about age, sexual motives or other aspects of identity; whether a face-to-face meeting took place; what illegal acts occurred; whether the crime involved coercion or force; the nature of any bond between offender and victim, and other details.

Statistical Analysis

Four weights were constructed to reflect the complex sample design. First, each case was given a sampling weight to account for the probability of selection in both the mail survey and telephone interview samples. The sampling weights were adjusted for agency nonresponse, case level nonresponse, duplication of cases among agencies, and for arrests by one federal agency that did not participate in case level interviews. Second, primary sampling unit weights were created to account for clustering within each of the three sampling frames. Third, stratification weights were computed based on the different sampling strategies for each frame. Finally, finite population correction factors accounted for the sampling being conducted without replacing ineligible cases. We conducted weighted descriptive analyses using Intercooled STATA 7.0 statistical software (StataCorp, College Station, TX).

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Victims and Offenders

Victims in Internet-initiated cases were predominantly young teens (see Table 2). Seventy-six percent were between 13 and 15 years old; 1% was age 12; none were younger than 12; 75% of victims were girls.

Ninety-nine percent of offenders were male. Almost all of the cases with male victims involved male offenders. The offenders were much older than their victims; 76% were age 26 or older; 47% were more than 20 years older than their victims.

Where and How Online Relationships Arose

Most first encounters between offenders and victims (76%) happened in online chat rooms. The chat

rooms included sites oriented to teens, to specific geographic locations, to dating and romance, to gays, and in a few cases, to sexual encounters between adults and minors. Offenders who met victims online in venues other than chat rooms appeared to use profiles posted by victims. One offender targeted his victim by searching profiles for the word "flirt." Another found a victim's birth date in her profile and sent her an electronic birthday card to initiate the acquaintance.

Most offenders took time to develop relationships with victims. Sixty-four percent communicated online with victims for more than 1 month. Most cases evolved into multiple forms of contact, including more than one kind of online interaction. Seventy-nine percent included telephone conversations; 48% of offenders sent pictures online to victims; and 47% sent or offered gifts or money. Gifts ranged from small tokens like jewelry and teddy bears to items like clothing, cell phones, and digital cameras. Investigators described victims in half of the cases as being in love with or having feelings of close friendship toward offenders.

The Role of Deception

Although most of the offenders were much older than their victims, deception about these large age differences was a rare feature of these crimes. Only 5% of offenders represented themselves online as peers of victims by claiming they were age 17 or younger. In some of these cases, the offenders started off saying they were teens, but later introduced that they were older. Another 25% of offenders shaved a few years off their true ages, but still presented themselves as much older than their young targets. For example, men who were 45 told victims they were 35.

Deception about sexual motives was also uncommon. Although 21% of offenders hid or misrepresented their motives, most of these deceivers were open about wanting sex from their victims. According to respondent investigators, most misrepresentations involved insincere promises of love and romance. However, some cases involved more fundamental deceptions. A few offenders posed as "friends" and then assaulted their victims, and a small number devised more elaborate ploys, for example luring girls by claiming to run modeling or casting agencies. Nonetheless, most offenders openly sexually solicited victims. Eighty percent brought up sexual topics during online communications with victims. Twenty percent engaged in cybersex with

Table 2. Characteristics of Victims and Dynamics of Internet-initiated Sex Crimes

Characteristics	Internet Initiated (n = 129) % (n) ^a
Victim age	
12	1% (3)
13	26% (30)
14	22% (39)
15	28% (35)
16	14% (15)
17	8% (7)
Victim gender	
Female	75% (94)
Male	25% (35)
Offender gender	
Female	1% (2)
Male	99% (127)
Offender age	
Less than 18	1% (2)
18 to 25	23% (31)
26 to 39	41% (52)
40 or more	35% (44)
Victim race	
Non-Hispanic White	81% (101)
African-American	7% (10)
Asian	5% (6)
Hispanic White	3% (6)
Other	1% (2)
Victim lived with	
Both biological parents	61% (69)
Single parent	27% (39)
Parent and stepparent	7% (11)
Foster parent or other	3% (6)
Highest educational level in victim's household ^b	
High school or less	23% (31)
Some college education	15% (15)
College graduate or more	21% (31)
Missing values	40% (52)
Income level of victim's household ^b	
Less than \$20,000	4% (7)
\$20,000 to \$50,000	42% (49)
More than \$50,000	30% (40)
Missing values	23% (33)
Type of community where victim lived ^b	
Urban	14% (26)
Suburban or large town	49% (58)
Small town or rural	31% (36)
Missing values	6% (9)
Dynamics of Internet-initiated relationships	
Offender met victim	
In a chatroom	76% (99)
Through Instant Messages	10% (15)
Through e-mail	5% (3)
Other	5% (5)
Initial meeting happened at a sexually oriented online site ^b	13% (19)
Offender communicated online with victim for ^b	
1 month or less	27% (39)
More than 1 to 6 months	48% (57)
More than 6 months	16% (21)

Table 2. continued

Characteristics	Internet Initiated (n = 129) % (n) ^a
Missing values	9% (4)
Offender and victim communicated online multiple ways ^b	77% (100)
Offender	
Talked to victim by telephone	79% (99)
Sent mail to victim ^b	19% (23)
Sent pictures to victim	48% (65)
Gave or offered victim money or gifts	47% (52)
Victim was in love or felt close to offender ^b	50% (60)
Offender was deceptive by	
Claiming to be younger than 18 ^b	5% (9)
Shaving years off age, but not claiming to be a minor ^b	25% (31)
Lying about physical appearance or other aspects of identity ^b	26% (30)
Lying about sexual motives ^b	21% (26)
Offender was deceptive to any extent ^b	52% (67)
Victim lied about being 18 or older	9% (9)
Offender used the Internet to	
Bring up sexual topics with victim ^b	80% (103)
Engage in cybersex with victim ^b	20% (25)
Send sexual pictures to victim ^b	18% (29)
Transmit adult pornography to victim ^b	10% (16)
Transmit child pornography to victim ^b	9% (12)
Offender and victim met face-to-face ^c	74% (99)
Sexual offense was committed at face-to-face meeting	93% (94)
Distance victim traveled to initial meeting	
10 miles or less	52% (46)
More than 10 to 50 miles	17% (17)
More than 50 miles	9% (8)
Distance offender traveled to initial meeting	
10 miles or less	8% (11)
More than 10 to 50 miles	32% (31)
More than 50 miles	41% (38)
Offender or victim traveled more than 50 miles to initial meeting	50% (46)
Offender crossed state line or international boundary	31% (26)
Victim crossed state line or international boundary	9% (7)
Initial face-to-face meeting happened at	
Public place	46% (38)
Hotel or motel	13% (13)
Offender's home	19% (18)
Victim's home	20% (26)
Other	2% (4)
Victim went somewhere with offender	83% (78)
Victim spent the night with offender	41% (36)
Offender and victim met more than once ^b	73% (69)
Most serious sexual offense committed	
Noncontact	1% (1)
Fondling	3% (4)
Oral sex	18% (14)
Intercourse or other penetration	71% (73)
Offender used violence or threat of violence	5% (8)
Offender used coercion	16% (18)

Table 2. continued

Characteristics	Internet Initiated (n = 129) % (n) ^a
Victim was	
Abducted (moved more than 50 feet against will)	3% (5)
Illegally detained	8% (11)
Injured by any means	2% (3)
Victim was reported missing to a law enforcement agency	29% (25)
Victim ran away to be with offender	24% (20)
Other aggravating circumstances	
Offered or given illegal drugs or alcohol	40% (32)
Exposed to adult pornography	23% (21)
Exposed to child pornography	15% (14)
Photographed in a suggestive or sexual pose	21% (23)

Note: Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding or missing values.

^a Ns and percentages may not be proportionate because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities. We report unweighted counts to avoid overstating sample size.

^b Missing values account for more than 5% of cases. Most missing values were because investigators did not have complete information in every case.

^c N = 99 for the percentages that follow.

victims, and 18% transmitted sexual pictures to victims online.

There were also other forms of deception and misrepresentation. Twenty-six percent of offenders lied at some point about their physical appearance or some other aspect of their identity like their name, family status or employment. Altogether, 52% lied about something at some point in the relationship, but deceptions about being considerably older adults interested in sexual relationships with teenagers did not occur in most of these crimes.

How Face-to-Face Meetings Developed

Most cases progressed to face-to-face sexual encounters. Seventy-four percent involved face-to-face meetings and 93% of the face-to-face meetings entailed illegal sexual contact between offenders and victims. The cases that did not involve face-to-face meetings fell into three categories. In some cases, victims reported the inappropriate overtures of offenders to the police, parents or other adults. In some cases, observant family members intervened before meetings occurred. Some crimes were committed solely online, for example one offender talked a victim into sending him a pair of her panties. Another persuaded a victim to create and send him a sexually explicit video.

Although media reports often describe offenders who travel long distances to meet victims, we found that half of offenders and victims who met face-to-face lived within 50 miles of each other. Forty percent of cases involved victims or offenders who crossed state or international boundaries to attend first meetings. Contrary to standard prevention advice given to youth, less than half (46%) of first face-to-face meetings occurred in public places; 39% took place in offenders' or victims' homes and 13% in hotels or motels. The great majority of victims who met offenders face-to-face (83%) willingly went somewhere with them, often riding in offenders' cars to the offender's home or to a hotel, mall, movie, or restaurant. Forty-one percent of victims spent at least one night with the offender.

Further, most victims who met offenders (73%) met them more than once; 13% met offenders twice; 39% met them three or more times and 20% lived with offenders for some period. Most recurring meetings happened within 6 months, but 4% happened over 1 to 3 years.

The Kinds of Sex Crimes that Occurred

In 89% of cases with face-to-face meetings, offenders had sexual intercourse, oral sex, or other form of penetrative sex with victims. Only 5% of cases involved violent offenses, mostly rape or attempted rape. Rapes did not always happen at first meetings. One male victim was raped after several meetings, when he tried to break off a sexual relationship with the offender. Sixteen percent of cases involved coercion. The victims in these cases were pressured into having sex or doing sexual things, like engaging in bondage, that they did not want to do. Again, coercion did not always happen at first meetings.

A few cases (3%) involved brief abductions that happened in the course of sexual assaults, but none involved stereotypical kidnappings in the sense of youth being taken against their will for a long distance or held for a considerable period of time. However, 29% of victims who attended face-to-face meetings with offenders were reported missing to police. Investigators described 24% of victims involved in face-to-face meetings as runaways. The other 5% who were reported missing had lied about their whereabouts to their parents, often claiming to be spending a night or a weekend with a friend.

Some victims who attended face-to-face meetings were given illegal drugs or alcohol (40%), exposed to adult or child pornography (23% and 15%, respectively), or photographed in sexual poses (21%). The

photography ranged from nude Polaroid pictures to hidden cameras secretly recording an offender's sex acts with a victim. In some cases, offenders convinced victims to take sexually explicit pictures of themselves or friends for the benefit of the offender.

In summary, most Internet-initiated sex crimes involved teenagers too young to consent to sexual intercourse that were described by respondents as in love with or close to the offenders they had met online. These were nonforcible crimes, committed by men who were much older than their victims. The victims knew they were interacting with adults who were interested in them sexually. The length and variety of communications and multiple face-to-face meetings in most cases indicate that many victims viewed their interactions with much older adult offenders as desired relationships.

Discussion

Confronting an Inaccurate Stereotype

The prevalent image of Internet sex crimes against minors is of strangers who are pedophiles and who deceive and lure unsuspecting children, frequently over long distances, into situations where they can be forcibly abducted or sexually assaulted. However, this nationally representative sample of Internet-initiated cases known to law enforcement suggests a different predominant scenario with different implications for prevention.

First, the offenders in these crimes do not appear to be pedophiles. Pedophilia is a sexual deviation involving sexual attraction to prepubescent children [12]. The victims in these cases were young adolescents. Ninety-nine percent were age 13 to 17, and none were younger than 12.

Second, although they undoubtedly manipulated juveniles in a variety of ways, the offenders in these Internet-initiated crimes did not generally deceive victims about being older adults who were interested in sexual relationships. Victims usually knew this before their first face-to-face encounters with offenders.

Third, with a few frightening and dangerous exceptions, the majority of offenders did not use force or coercion to sexually abuse their victims and did not abduct them. Victims, who were predominantly young teenagers, typically agreed to meet these adults, knowing of their sexual interest. They engaged in sexual intercourse, or other sexual activity, with the adults, often on multiple occasions.

Fourth, it is misleading to characterize the offenders in these cases as "strangers" to their victims,

because in most cases they had communicated extensively with victims, both online and off before they actually met in person. Offenders used these interactions to establish romantic or otherwise close relationships before they first met victims face-to-face.

Implications for Prevention

These dynamics have important implications for prevention. Current prevention materials about Internet safety emphasize the dangers of deception. They stress that adolescents should not trust people they meet online and urge them to avoid meeting strangers and giving out personal information online. Although these may be useful messages to prevent some forms of victimization, they do not address the dynamics of the Internet sexual exploitation found in a majority of actual cases.

The data suggest that a major challenge for prevention is the population of young teens who are willing to enter into voluntary sexual relationships with adults whom they meet online. This is a reality that health and prevention educators, law enforcement officials and parents may be reluctant to confront. But effective prevention requires public and private acknowledgment of what actually happens in these cases.

Education and Awareness

Appropriate prevention messages can be targeted to the general audience of adolescents [13]. One avenue is to educate teenagers directly about why such relationships are a bad idea. Young teens may not be fully aware that the adults in these relationships are committing crimes and can go to jail. They have probably not considered the publicity, embarrassment, and life disruption likely to accompany a public revelation of such a relationship. They may benefit from understanding the manipulations that adult offenders engage in, and from understanding that adults who care about their well-being would not propose sexual relationships or involve them in risky encounters. They should be informed of why such romances end quickly, even when not discovered, and how frequently the offenders have other partners. They should know that corresponding with adults trolling for teenage partners can encourage offenders and endanger other youth, even when relationships are confined to the Internet. They need to be told bluntly that any sexual pictures they pose for may end up on the Internet or as evidence in a courtroom.

This aspect of adolescent sexual behavior has implications for parents and professionals, too. In addition to monitoring for unhealthy online relationships with adults, parents and professionals working with children need to discuss the reality and inadvisability of these relationships. Because one quarter of the victims were 13-year-olds, these discussions need to start in earliest adolescence.

Vulnerable Populations

Poor relationships with parents. Some adolescents may be particularly susceptible to Internet overtures from adults looking for young sexual partners. Adolescent girls who report a high degree of conflict with their parents, boys who report low parental monitoring, and adolescents of both sexes who are troubled with depression and related problems are more likely than other youth to form close online relationships with people they meet online [7]. These youth may constitute a susceptible population. Consequently, prevention efforts must account for the fact that some of the most vulnerable adolescents may be estranged from their parents or have parents who are not monitoring their behavior. In these cases, prevention education could be aimed at those that may assume roles of confidant. For example, teens involved in these relationships may confide in friends. Prevention educators should urge young people to protect their friends by revealing these relationships, when necessary.

Loneliness and depression. Also, practitioners engaged in efforts to identify and treat depressed adolescents need to be aware that some depressed youth may be turning to the Internet to ameliorate their loneliness. Questions about Internet use and online relationships should be part of protocols for working with depressed young people. Young teens who are lonely or depressed or who have difficult relationships with their parents may be more vulnerable to harmful effects of Internet-initiated sexual relationships with adults, as well as to the relationships themselves.

Gay or questioning boys. The findings from this study that a quarter of the relationships involved teenage boys with adult men highlights another group worthy of special prevention initiatives: teenagers recognizing themselves as homosexual or questioning their sexual orientation. Such youth, using the Internet to seek out contacts and information about homosexuality and sexual orientation, may be vulnerable to

adults online who initiate sexual relationships in the guise of helping teens sort out these issues. Better efforts to direct young people to trustworthy sources of help from physicians, school personnel, mental health agencies, and support organizations may forestall some of these offenses.

"Compliant" or "statutory" victims. Moreover, those who provide services to adolescent victims need to understand that their clients may view these relationships quite differently than law enforcement, mental health practitioners, and other adults. Some practitioners and law enforcement investigators have begun to pay more specific attention to adolescent victims of Internet-initiated and other nonforcible or statutory sex crimes [14,15]. These victims, sometimes referred to as "compliant" or "statutory victims," may actively cooperate with offenders and develop strong sexual and emotional attachments to them. These youth may not see themselves as victims and may resist cooperating with investigators. Traditional medical and mental health protocols for handling child sexual abuse victims may not prepare practitioners to deal with adolescents who are victims of nonforcible sex crimes. Training and protocols should be reviewed to assure that adolescent victims are treated appropriately and compassionately.

Limitations

First, because most sex crimes against minors are never reported to the police [16–18] and many of those known to law enforcement do not culminate in arrest [19], this sample cannot be said to represent the characteristics of all Internet-initiated victimizations that occurred during the period of the study, but only those that ended in the arrest of an offender.

Second, some errors and biases may have been introduced because we interviewed law enforcement investigators. We regarded these respondents as the best sources for in-depth information about the nature of Internet-initiated crimes because their professional responsibilities require them to gather intensive information about these cases. However, the information they provided could be biased by training, professional attitudes, or the adversarial nature of their roles in some of these cases.

Finally, our findings were somewhat limited by the small sample size, and a larger sample would have allowed for a more nuanced analysis of findings.

Future Research

Research about Internet-initiated sex offenses against minors is in its infancy, and prevention of this crime problem will be assisted by future work focusing on several related areas. First, these offenses happen within the context of online relationships, which appear to occur widely and with great variety among both adolescents and adults. Further study about the nature and characteristics of online relationships in general will help to distinguish between the qualities of healthy and unhealthy relationships so that prevention can be aimed at the latter while not discouraging the former. Second, we need to identify vulnerable youth populations, including how Internet use may be associated with mental health problems among youth and how some types of Internet behavior may constitute new forms of sexual risk behavior, or may interact with other sexual risk behaviors. We also need to evaluate the impact of victimization by nonforcible sex crimes on adolescents. Internet-initiated crimes, especially when perpetrated upon naïve adolescents, could involve elements of projection and betrayal that could increase their harm. Third, research should look at the characteristics of Internet offenders and how they operate online. Finally, we need to evaluate the effectiveness of various prevention messages aimed at reducing risky behavior online, increasing youth resistance to inappropriate overtures by adults, and encouraging reporting of online sexual solicitations to authorities.

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