SUMMARY:
The publicity about online “predators” who prey on naive children using trickery and violence is largely inaccurate. Internet-initiated sex crimes involving adults and juveniles more often fit a model of statutory rape – adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and openly seduce underage teenagers -- than a model of forcible sexual assault or pedophilic child molesting. This is a serious problem, but one that requires different approaches from current prevention messages emphasizing parental control and the dangers of divulging personal information.

Developmentally appropriate prevention strategies that target youth directly and acknowledge normal adolescent interests in romance and sex are needed. These should provide younger adolescents with awareness and avoidance skills, while educating older youth about the pitfalls of sexual relationships with adults and their criminal nature.

Particular attention should be paid to higher risk youth, including those with histories of sexual abuse, sexual orientation concerns, and patterns of off- and online risk taking. Mental health practitioners need information about the dynamics of this problem and the characteristics of victims and offenders because they are likely to encounter related issues in a variety of contexts.

KEY POINTS
- Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce underage adolescents into sexual encounters.

- Most offenders are open about being older adults who are interested in sex. Offenders are commonly charged with nonforcible sex crimes against underage youth, such as statutory rape. Most victims are young adolescents, ages 13 to 15.

- Underage youth cannot consent to sexual activity with adults. When young adolescents are victims of statutory rape, it is important to remember that they have little experience with intimate relationships and often do not know how to negotiate with older partners about sexual activity. Many youth in these cases believe they are in love. Some are looking for sexual adventure. Others are pressured or coerced into intercourse. In every case, the adult is the offender.

- Statutory rape is a relatively prevalent crime. In 2000, about 25% of the sex crimes committed against minors and reported to police involved statutory rape. In crimes that ended in arrest, offenders may have met victims online in about 7% of all statutory rapes in 2000.

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1 This is a summary of the main points and recommendations made in our paper: Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K., & Ybarra, M. (2008.) Online “Predators” and their Victims: Myths, Realities and Implications for Prevention and Treatment. American Psychologist, 63, 111-128. Copyright APA. See http://content.apa.org/journals/amp. For a copy of the paper, please access our website, www.unh.edu/ccrc or email Janis.Wolak@unh.edu.
• Certain online behaviors make youth vulnerable to seduction by online sex offenders. These include sending personal information to unknown people and talking to unknown people about sex. These interactive behaviors appear to carry more risk than posting personal information or maintaining social networking sites. Further, youth who engage in a high number of different risky online behaviors (for example, having unknown people on a buddy list, seeking pornography online, using the Internet to harass others) are also more at risk.

• Some youth are more vulnerable than others. Certain characteristics – histories of physical or sexual abuse, delinquency, depression, conflict with parents – appear to increase risk. Boys who are gay or questioning their sexual orientation are another at risk population.

• Online sex offenders are generally not pedophiles (who target prepubescent children) and are rarely violent. About 5% of cases involve violence, usually rape or attempted rape.

• A considerable number of online child molesters also possess child pornography, and child pornography production is an important element in many cases, including situations where offenders solicit victims to produce sexual images of themselves.

• While there are concerns that aspects of the Internet may trigger sexual offending or make youth more accessible to sex offenders, sex crimes against youth in general have not increased. In fact, sexual abuse has decreased considerably since the early 1990s. However, the trends for internet sex crimes specifically have not been well documented and the situation should be carefully monitored.

RECOMMENDATIONS
• Avoid descriptions of the problem that characterize victims as young children or emphasize violence and deception. Portraying victims as young children does not sensitize the public, parents, or adolescents to the nature of Internet-initiated sex crimes. Similarly, characterizing these crimes as violent makes it hard for the public and professionals to recognize nonforcible crimes such as statutory rape, and it may prevent victims from reporting crimes which do not conform to violent stereotypes. Although it would be a mistake to say that these crimes never involve violence or deception, the public already may be so aware of those possibilities that it is essential to provide countervailing information.

• Be clear about why sex with underage adolescents is wrong. Messages should reinforce norms and counteract media that present sexualized images of youth. Offenders and potential offenders need to hear a clear message that nonforcible sex with underage adolescents violates the social responsibility adults have toward youth for objective mentoring and custodianship.

• Focus prevention efforts more on adolescents and less on parents. The adolescents who tend to be the victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes may not be very receptive to the advice and supervision of parents. Prevention strategies should be targeted more directly at adolescents themselves, using media and authorities, including other youth, that have their confidence. Another important audience for these messages is
peers and other “bystanders.”

- **Focus prevention frankly on concerns relevant to adolescents, including autonomy, romance and sex.** Youth need candid, direct discussions about seduction and how some adults deliberately evoke and then exploit the compelling feelings that sexual arousal can induce. This information should include reassurances that it is normal to have strong sexual feelings, but wrong for adults to provoke or exploit these feelings.

- **Prevention should be developmentally appropriate and an aspect of broader programs that focus on healthy sexual development and avoiding victimization.** With younger adolescents, programs might emphasize types of Internet use and web sites, risky situations youth may encounter online, and practicing refusal and resistance techniques. Older adolescents could use information about age of consent laws, the problems of relationships with older partners, the dangers of transmitting sexual pictures, and online grooming tactics used by sexual offenders.

- **Focus prevention more on interactive aspects of Internet use and less on posting personal information.** Millions of youth use social networking sites safely, and we have not found evidence that these sites are more risky than other popular online venues. Prevention messages should focus on online interactions because Internet-initiated sex crimes come about through direct communications between offenders and victims. Youth should be encouraged to report inappropriate sexual overtures to web site and law enforcement authorities.

- **Educate youth about criminal behavior and child pornography.** An adult using the Internet to make sexual advances to minors is a crime in most U.S. jurisdictions. Prevention messages also need to publicize the prevalence and risks of adults asking youth to take sexually explicit pictures of themselves. We need to extend this education to parents and clinicians as well. Clinicians who work with youth who have been sexually abused and assaulted should be alert to the possibilities that illegal sexual images of victims may have been produced.

- **Develop targeted prevention approaches for the most at risk youth populations.** Most current prevention programs are developed for the general population of youth Internet users, but the most at risk youth may be hard to reach with these materials. Since mental health professionals may have more opportunities for interaction with at risk youth, we suggest that mental health organizations, with youth input, work to develop prevention materials that can be used by practitioners with such populations, individually or in small groups.