ONLINE VICTIMIZATION: WHAT YOUTH TELL US*

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In the analysis of crime, the perspectives of victims and potential victims often yield different and complementary insights to the perspective of law enforcement officials for conventional crime; the victim perspective is represented, for example, by the National Crime Victimization Survey, which has been an important complement to the law enforcement perspective obtained from police records. To understand ways to prevent and intervene in the problem of Internet offenses, this victim-level perspective is equally important and was the impulse behind the Youth Internet Safety Survey described in this chapter.

This national study, funded by the US Congress through a grant to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), confirms some of the reality portrayed by other chapters in these volumes. Large numbers of young people who use the Internet are encountering unwanted sexual solicitations, sexual material they do not seek, and people who threaten and harass them in various ways. The study also presents a complementary picture of the many kinds of situations young people experience that tend to escape official detection. Further, it shows that some youth are able to glide past unwelcome online encounters as mere litter on the information superhighway, but others experience them as real collisions with a reality they did not expect and are distressed to find.

This chapter describes the variety of disconcerting experiences young Internet users have online and the variety of ways they react. It provides a window into the ways families and young people are addressing matters of danger and protection on the Internet. Some of the news is reassuring. At the same time, these results suggest that the seamy side of the Internet spills into the lives of an uncomfortably large number of children, and relatively few families or young people do much about it. The findings highlight a great need for private and public initiatives to raise awareness and provide solutions.

Nothing in this chapter contradicts the increasingly well-documented fact that children and their families are excited about the Internet and its possibilities. They are, in effect, voting for the Internet with their fingers and pocket books even though they are aware of some of its drawbacks. Since the Internet is destined to play such an

important role in the lives of young people growing up today, the question of how to temper some of the drawbacks of this revolutionary medium is worthy of serious consideration now at the dawn of the Internet's development.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The Youth Internet Safety Survey used telephone interviews to gather information from a national sample of 1501 young people between the ages of 10 and 17 who were regular Internet users. **Table 21-1** presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. "Regular" Internet use was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past 6 months on a computer at home, school, library, someone else's home, or some other place. This definition was chosen to exclude occasional Internet users while including a range of "heavy" and "light" users. Prior to the youth interview, a short interview was conducted with a parent or guardian in the household. Regular Internet use by a youth was determined initially by questions to the parent or guardian and then confirmed during the youth interview. (Further details about the methodology of the survey are found in **Appendix 21-1**.)

Table 21-1. Youth and Household Characteristics* (n = 1501)

CHARACTERISTIC	% ALL YOUTH
Age of youth (in years)	
10	4%
11	8%
12	11%
13	15%
14	16%
15	18%
16	17%
17	13%
Gender of youth	
Male	53%
Female	47%
Race of youth	
Non-Hispanic White	73%
Black or African American	10%
American Indian or Alaska Native	3%
Asian	3%
Hispanic White	2%
Other	7%
Unknown/Refused to answer	2%
Marital status of parent/guardian	
Married	79%
Divorced	10%
Single/Never married	5%
Living with partner	1%
Separated	2%
Widowed	2%
Youth lives with both biological parents	64%

(continued)

Table 21-1. *(continued)*

CHARACTERISTIC	% ALL YOUTH
Highest level of completed education in household	
Not a high school graduate	2%
High school graduate	21%
Some college education	22%
College graduate	31%
Post-college degree	22%
Annual household income	
Less than $20 000	8%
$20 000 to $50 000	38%
$50 000 to $75 000	23%
More than $75 000	23%
Type of community	
Small town	28%
Suburb of large city	21%
Rural area	20%
Large town (25 000 to 100 000)	15%
Large city	14%

* *All the data in this table are based on questions asked of the parent and/or guardian, with the exception of the information regarding race.*

NOTE: Categories that do not add up to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

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PATTERNS OF YOUTH INTERNET USE

Most of the youth who were interviewed (74%) had access to the Internet at home. They used the Internet in a number of other locations, including school (73%), other households (68%), and public libraries (32%). The majority of youth (86%) used the Internet in more than one location. At the time of the interview, most youth had last used the Internet during the past week (76%), with 10% reporting Internet use in the last 2 weeks and 14% in the past month or longer. In a typical week, 40% used the Internet 2 to 4 days a week, 31% went online 5 to 7 days a week, and 29% went online once a week or less. When they used the Internet, 61% of youth spent 1 hour or less online during a typical day; 26% spent 1 to 2 hours; and 13% spent more than 2 hours online during a typical day.

OVERALL INCIDENCE OF ONLINE VICTIMIZATION

We asked youth about unwanted sexual solicitations or approaches, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment during the year before the interview. **Table 21-2** provides definitions for the types of online victimization measured in this survey. More detailed information about the measures and limitations of the study can be found in **Appendixes 21-2** and **21-3**.

SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS AND APPROACHES

Approximately 1 in 5 of the youth interviewed (19%) received an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach during the previous year (**Figure 21-1**). Not all of these episodes were disturbing to the recipients; however, 5% of the total number of youth (1 in 4 of those solicited) reported a solicitation that left them feeling very or extremely upset or afraid, cases that we called ***distressing incidents***. In addition, for 3% of the total number of youth (1 in 7 of all the solicitations), the sexual solic-
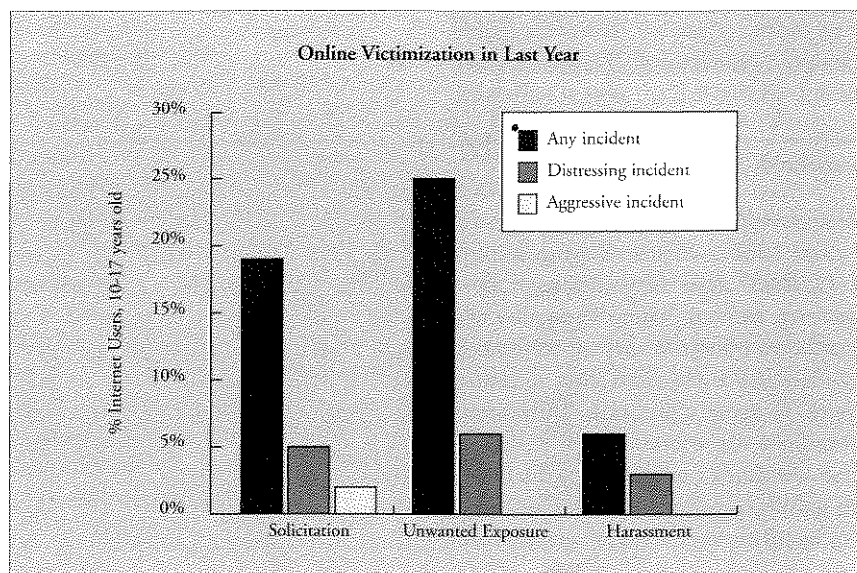
Figure 21-1. *Online victimization (including solicitation, unwanted exposure, and harassment) of youth ages 10 to 17 years old during 1999-2000.* Reprinted with permission from the NCMEC.

itation included an attempt at offline contact in person, over the telephone, or by regular mail. We called these ***aggressive sexual solicitations***.

UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

Twenty-five percent of the youth experienced at least one unwanted exposure to pictorial sexual material in the last year. Seventy-one percent of these exposures occurred while youth were searching or surfing the Internet; 28% happened while they were opening e-mail or clicking on links in e-mail or instant messages. Because exposure to sexual images, even when unwanted, is not necessarily offensive, we designated a category of ***distressing exposures*** to identify situations in which youth found an exposure very or extremely upsetting. Six percent of youth reported distressing exposures to sexual material on the Internet in the last year.

HARASSMENT

Six percent of youth were the targets of threats or other kinds of offensive behavior, which we called ***harassment***. One third of these youth reported distressing incidents,

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Table 21-2. What is Online Victimization?

People can be victimized online in many ways. In the Youth Internet Safety Survey, we asked about 3 kinds of victimization that have been prominent in discussions of youth and the Internet—sexual solicitation and approaches, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment. (See **Appendix 21-2** for a complete explanation of these variables.)

Sexual solicitation and approaches
Requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or give personal sexual information that were *unwanted* or, whether wanted or not, *made by an adult*.

Aggressive sexual solicitation
Sexual solicitations involving *offline contact* with the perpetrator through regular mail, by telephone, or in person, as well as attempts or requests for offline contact.

Unwanted exposure to sexual material
Without seeking or expecting sexual material, being exposed to pictures of naked people or people having sex when conducting online searches, surfing the Web, and opening e-mail or e-mail links.

Harassment
Threats or other offensive behavior (not sexual solicitations) sent online to the youth or posted online for others to see. Not all such incidents were distressing to the youth who experienced them. *Distressing incidents* were episodes during which the youth rated themselves as very or extremely upset or afraid as a result of the incident.

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that is, harassment that left them feeling very or extremely upset or afraid. What follows are more detailed descriptions of our findings.

SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS AND APPROACHES

With so many young people socializing on the Internet, a key law enforcement concern has been the access and anonymity that the Internet affords to persons who might want to exploit youth sexually. The Youth Internet Safety Survey confirms that large numbers of youth get sexually propositioned online although not always in the form of the most frightening law enforcement stereotypes.

To assess the problem of sexual exploitation, the survey asked youth about 4 kinds of incidents:

1. Sexual approaches, that is, when someone online tried to get them to talk about sex when they did not want to or asked unwanted, intimate questions

2. Sexual solicitations from people online who asked them to do sexual things they did not want to do

3. Close friendships formed online with adults, including whether these involved sexual overtures

4. Encouragement from people they met online to run away, a ploy apparently favored by some individuals looking for vulnerable youth

YOUTH TARGETS FOR SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS

Girls were targeted for sexual solicitation at almost twice the rate of boys (66% versus 34%), but given that girls are often thought to be the exclusive targets of sexual solicitation, the sizable percentage of boys solicited is important. More than three quarters of targeted youth (77%) were 14 years old or older (**Figure 21-2** and **Table 21-3**). Only 22% of the youth were between the ages of 10 and 13 years of age, but this younger group reported 37% of the distressing episodes, thereby suggesting that younger youth have a harder time shrugging off such solicitations.

PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS

Virtually all perpetrators (97%) were persons the youth originally met online (**Table 21-3**). Adults were responsible for 24% of sexual solicitations and 34% of the aggressive solicitations. Most of the adult solicitors were reported to be between the ages of 18 and 25. About 4% of all solicitors were known to be older than 25.
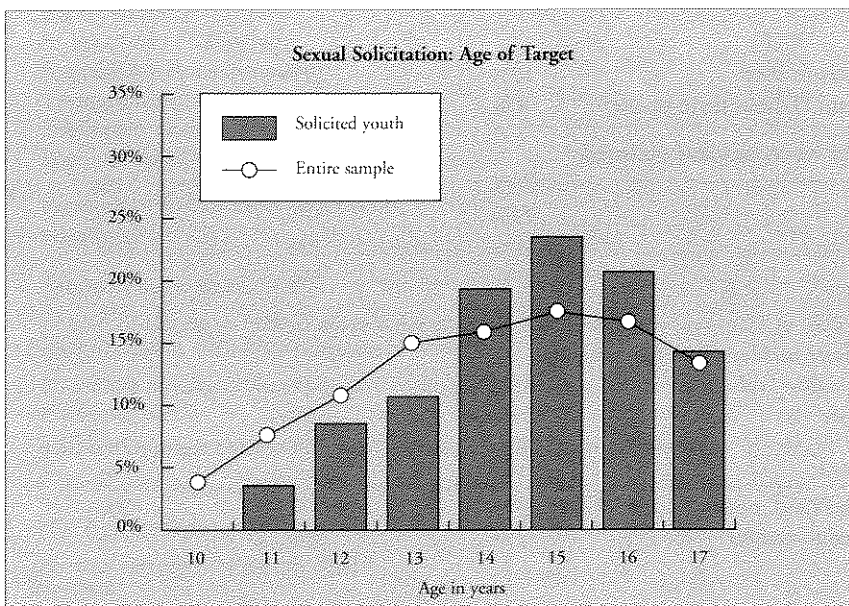

Figure 21-2. Youth as targets of online sexual solicitation, ages 10 to 17 years old. (NOTE: Adds up to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.) Reprinted with permission from the NCMEC.

Table 21-3. Internet Sexual Solicitation of Youth (n = 1501)

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS	ALL INCIDENTS (N=286) 19% OF YOUTH	AGGRESSIVE INCIDENTS (N=43) 3% OF YOUTH	DISTRESSING INCIDENTS (N=72) 5% OF YOUTH
Age of youth (in years)			
10	<1%	—	—
11	3%	5%	10%
12	8%	2%	14%
13	11%	14%	13%
14	19%	12%	8%
15	23%	28%	24%
16	21%	25%	15%
17	14%	14%	17%
Gender of youth			
Male	34%	33%	25%
Female	66%	67%	75%
EPISODE CHARACTERISTICS	ALL (N=293)	AGGRESSIVE (N=44)	DISTRESSING (N=72)
Gender of solicitor			
Male	67%	64%	72%
Female	19%	25%	13%
Unknown	13%	11%	14%
Age of solicitor			
Younger than 18 years	48%	48%	54%
18 to 25 years	20%	27%	17%
Older than 25 years	4%	7%	8%
Unknown	27%	18%	19%
Relation to solicitor			
Met online	97%	100%	96%
Knew in person before incident	3%	—	3%
Location of solicitor			
Youth knew where person lived	13%	29%	17%
Person lived near youth (1-hour drive or less)	4%	11%	7%
Location of computer when incident occurred			
Home	70%	66%	51%
Someone else's home	22%	27%	36%
School	4%	2%	5%
Library	3%	5%	4%
Another place	1%	—	1%
Place on Internet where incident first happened			
Chat room	65%	52%	60%
Using instant messages	24%	36%	26%
Specific web page	4%	7%	7%
E-mail	2%	2%	1%
Game room, message board, newsgroup, or other	3%	—	2%
Do not know/Refused to answer	2%	2%	1%

(continued)

Table 21-3. *(continued)*

EPISODE CHARACTERISTICS	(N = 293)	(N = 44)	(N = 72)
Forms of offline contact* [†]			
Asked to meet somewhere	10%	66%	20%
Sent regular mail	6%	39%	9%
Called on telephone	2%	14%	4%
Came to house	<1%	2%	—
Gave money, gifts, or other things	1%	5%	1%
Bought plane, train, or bus ticket	<1%	2%	—
None of the above	84%	—	70%
How situation ended			
Logged off computer	28%	25%	35%
Left site	24%	16%	22%
Blocked perpetrator	14%	25%	17%
Told them to stop	13%	11%	5%
Changed screen name, profile, or e-mail address	5%	13%	13%
Stopped without youth doing anything	4%	9%	5%
Called police or other authorities	1%	2%	3%
Other	20%	20%	18%
Incident known or disclosed to*			
Friend/Sibling	29%	41%	32%
Parent	24%	32%	33%
Another adult	4%	7%	7%
Teacher or school person	1%	2%	3%
Internet Service Provider/CyberTipline	9%	14%	11%
Police or other authority	<1%	2%	1%
Someone else	1%	—	1%
No one	49%	36%	37%
Youth with no/low levels of upset and being afraid	75%	55%	—
Youth was very/extremely embarrassed about the incident	17%	32%	50%
Stress symptoms (more than a little or all the time)* [‡]			
At least one of following:	25%	43%	60%
Stayed away from Internet	20%	32%	44%
Thought about it and could not stop	11%	27%	35%
Felt jumpy or irritable	5%	20%	21%
Lost interest in things	3%	5%	10%
Presence of five or more depression symptoms [§][‖]	17%	30%	24%

* *Multiple responses possible.*

† *Only youth who did not know the solicitor before the incident were asked this question (n = 284 for all incidents, n = 44 for aggressive incidents, and n = 70 for distressing incidents).*

‡ *These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.*

§ *In the entire sample, 8% of youth (n = 117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.*

‖ *The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.*

NOTE: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

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Juveniles made 48% of the overall and 48% of the aggressive solicitations. Slightly more than two thirds of the solicitations and approaches came from males. One quarter of the aggressive episodes came from females. In 13% of instances, the youth knew where the solicitor lived. Youth stated that the solicitor lived nearby (ie, within a 1 hour drive of the youth's home) in only 4% of incidents.

Thus, not all of the sexual trawlers on the Internet fit the media stereotype of an older, male predator. Many are young, and some are women. It must be kept in mind, given the anonymity provided by the Internet, that individuals may easily hide or mis-represent themselves. In a large percentage of cases (27%), the youth did not know the age of the person making the overture. In 13% of cases, the gender was unknown. In almost all of the cases in which the youth gave an age or gender for a perpetrator, the youth had never met the perpetrator in person, thereby leaving the accuracy of the identifying information in question.

SOLICITATION INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS
Based on the descriptions given to interviewers, many of the sexual propositions appear to be solicitations for *cybersex*—a form of fantasy sex that involves interactive chat room sessions during which the participants describe sexual acts and sometimes disrobe and masturbate. In 70% of incidents, the youth were at home when they were solicited; in 22% of incidents, the youth were at someone else's home (**Table 21-3**). In 65% of incidents, the youth met the person who solicited them in a chat room; in 24% of episodes, the meeting occurred through instant messages. In 10% of incidents, the perpetrators asked to meet the youth somewhere; in 6% of incidents, the youth received regular mail; in 2% of incidents, the youth received a telephone call; and in 1% of incidents, the youth received money or gifts. In 1 instance, the youth received a travel ticket. We labeled these incidents *aggressive solicitations*. In most incidents, the youth ended the solicitations by using various strategies: logging off the computer, leaving the site, and/or blocking the person. **Table 21-4** describes some of these experiences.

YOUTH RESPONSE TO ONLINE SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS
In almost half of the incidents (49%), the youth did not tell anyone about the epi-sode, and even when the episode was aggressive, the youth did not tell anyone in 36% of incidents (**Table 21-3**). Some youth disclosed the incident to a parent (24%) or to a friend or sibling (29%). Only 10% of incidents were reported to an authority, such as a teacher, an Internet Service Provider, or law enforcement officer. Even with aggressive episodes, only 18% were reported to an authority.

It is remarkable that so few of the sexual solicitation episodes, even those that were quite distressing, prompted the youth to confide in someone or make a report to an authority. Some of this probably reflects that, in some cases, the youth were not that alarmed. Many probably did not know or doubted whether anything could be done. But some of it may reflect embarrassment or shame, because the youth may have believed they had gone places on the Internet where parents, law enforcement of-ficers, or even friends would disapprove. Some may have been concerned that their access to the Internet would be restricted if they told a parent about an incident.

IMPACT OF SOLICITATIONS ON YOUTH
In 75% of incidents, youth had no reaction or only a minor reaction, saying they were not very upset or afraid in the wake of the solicitation (**Table 21-3**); however, in 20% of incidents, youth were very or extremely upset, and in 13% of incidents, they were very or extremely afraid. In 36% of the aggressive solicitations, youth were very or extremely upset, and in 25% of incidents, they were very or extremely afraid. In 17% of incidents, youth were very or extremely embarrassed. This was true in 32% of aggressive incidents. In one quarter of incidents, youth reported at least one

Table 21-4. Testimony From Youth Regarding Sexual Solicitations

— A 13-year-old girl said that someone asked her about her bra size.

— A 17-year-old boy said someone asked him to "cyber" (ie, have cybersex). The first time this happened, he did not know what cybersex was. The second time it happened, he "just said, 'no.'"

— A 14-year-old girl said that men who claimed to be 18 or 20 would send her instant messages asking for her measurements and other questions about what she looked like. She said she was 13 years old when this happened, and the men knew her age.

— A 12-year-old girl said people told her sexual things they were doing and asked her to play with herself.

— A 15-year-old girl said an older man kept "bothering" her. He asked her if she was a virgin and wanted to meet her.

— A 16-year-old girl said a man would talk to her about sexual things he wanted to do to her and suggest places he would like to meet her.

— A 13-year-old boy said a girl asked him how big his privates were and wanted him to "jack off."

— Another 13-year-old boy said that a man had sent him a drawing of a man having sex with a dog. The man said it was a picture of himself.

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symptom of stress (eg, staying away from the Internet, not being able to stop thinking about the incident, feeling jumpy or irritable, losing interest in things) "more than a little" or "all the time." The aggressive episodes were more distressing, with at least one symptom of stress reported in 43% of episodes. Seventeen percent of the youth who were solicited experienced 5 or more symptoms of depression at the time we interviewed them, which is twice the rate of depressive symptoms in the overall sample.

Most of the youth who were solicited appeared to brush off the encounters and treat them as minor annoyances. Nonetheless, there was a core group of youth who experienced high levels of upset and/or fear. For these youth, the experience may have provoked stress responses. It is reassuring that most solicited youth are not affected, but given the large proportions of youth who are solicited, the group with the strongly negative reaction is quite substantial.

YOUTH AT RISK FOR SEXUAL SOLICITATION

Identifying the vulnerable population of youth is an important first step in the development of effective prevention and intervention programs surrounding online sexual solicitations. Logistic regression findings from these data suggest youth at risk tend to be older (ie, between 14 and 17 years), female, troubled, have high rates of Internet use, use chat rooms, talk with strangers online, engage in high online risk behavior, and use the Internet in households other than their own (Mitchell et al, 2001) (**Table 21-5**). These findings suggest that troubled youth and youth with high Internet use and risk behavior may be at increased risk for victimization and are worth targeting for prevention efforts. Yet, caution needs to be taken not to focus exclusively on these youth, because 42% of youth reporting sexual solicitations were not troubled or high or risky Internet users.

Table 21-5. Composite Variable Characteristics

— *Troubled* is a composite variable that includes items from a negative life event scale (eg, a death in the family, a move to a new home, divorced or separated parents, the loss of a parent's job), the physical and sexual assault items on a victimization scale, and a depression scale, or more depression symptoms in the past month. Those with a composite value 1 standard deviation above the mean or higher were coded as having this characteristic while the rest were coded as 0.

— *High Internet use* is a composite variable consisting of high experience with the Internet (ie, 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5), high importance of Internet in the child's life (ie, 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5), spending 4 or more days online in a typical week, and spending 2 or more hours online in a typical day. Youth with a composite value 1 standard deviation above the mean or higher were considered high Internet users.

— *High online risk behavior* is a composite variable of the following dichotomous variables pertaining to behavior online: posting personal information, making rude or nasty comments, playing a joke on or annoying someone, harassing or embarrassing someone, talking about sex with someone the youth never met in person, and going to X-rated sites on purpose. Youth with a composite value 2 standard deviations above the mean or higher were considered high online risk takers.

ARE YOUTH FORMING RISKY INTERNET FRIENDSHIPS WITH ADULTS?

A key law enforcement concern is that many adults are using the Internet to form friendships with youth for purposes of sexual exploitation. To assess this question, we asked youth about the friendships they had formed through the Internet.

Sixteen percent of youth reported forming close friendships with someone they had met online. **Close friendship** was defined as "someone you could talk to online about things that were real important to you." These close friendships were pre-dominantly with other youth. Just 3% of youth had formed a close friendship with an adult they met on the Internet. The youth involved in friendships with adults (defined as people older than 18) were almost exclusively between the ages of 15 and 17 years old. Girls were somewhat more likely than boys (ie, 59% of girls versus 41% of boys) to have formed close online friendships with adults.

The adult Internet friends were male and female and were usually young adults (between the ages 18 and 25). The youth typically met them in chat rooms, where they shared similar interests. In most of these friendships (69%), there had been some contact between the adult and youth outside of the Internet, that is, mostly by the telephone or regular mail. Parents knew about approximately three quarters of these friendships with adults. In almost one third of the youth-adult friendships, the youth actually met the adult in person. Usually this meeting took place in a public place with a friend present. Parents knew about one third of these meetings.

Regarding the key question of interest to parents and law enforcement officials, 2 of the total number of close friendships with adults were reported as having sexual aspects. One was a romantic relationship between a 17-year-old male and a woman in her late twenties; his parents knew about the relationship. The second friendship involved a man in his thirties who traveled to meet a 16-year-old girl. Although she stated that the relationship was not sexual, he did want to spend the night with her.

The study presents a complex picture about Internet relationships. Many young people are forming close friendships through the Internet, and some are forming close

friendships with adults. Most such relationships appear to have no taint of sexual exploitation. The fact that our survey found few sexually oriented relationships between youth and adults does not mean they do not occur. They certainly do occur but probably at a level too infrequent to be detected by a survey of this size. These relationships seem to be few in a much larger set of seemingly benign friendships.

Young people may come to consider Internet friendships as one of the great resources the Internet provides. Prevention educators should acknowledge this as they try to become credible sources of useful information about safety practices.

From a prevention point of view, the survey found that many simple cautions (ie, do not form friendships with people you do not know, do not form relationships with adults, or do not have lunch with people you meet on the Internet) are unlikely to be seen as realistic, particularly by older teenagers. Though telling teenagers to inform their parents about Internet friends seems sound advice, for many older teenagers, this is also not likely to be practiced. Probably the best approach, based on findings here, is to remind youth that people they meet may have ulterior motives and hidden agendas. The caution to first meet someone from the Internet in a safe, public, or supervised place, as well as to alert others (eg, family, friends) about such a meeting, seems something that teenagers may be more likely to put into practice.

ARE YOUTH BEING SOLICITED TO RUN AWAY BY POTENTIALLY PREDATORY ADULTS?

Another situation of concern to law enforcement authorities has been youth who are encouraged to run away from home by persons they meet over the Internet. Seven youth (0.4% of the sample) revealed such an episode. In 2 instances, the episodes involved communications from teenaged friends or acquaintances. Five instances involved encouragement to run away from people unknown to the youth. Of these, 2 were identified as teenagers, 2 were identified as adults in their thirties, and in one instance, the person's age was unknown. Some descriptions of these incidents follow.

A 12-year-old girl reported an incident with a person identified as a young teenage boy. The boy encouraged her to run away and said it would make things "better." In another incident, a 16-year-old boy said he was talking to a man in his thirties about problems the boy was having with his family. The man suggested he run away and offered him a place to stay. Four of the 7 runaway incidents were not disclosed to parents or authorities. Three were disclosed to parents. Both of the episodes detailed here were disclosed to parents and reported either to law enforcement officials or an Internet Service Provider.

SUMMARY

Sexual solicitations and approaches occur to approximately 1 in 5 regular Internet-using youth during the course of a year. Most incidents are brief and easily deflected, but some turn out to be distressing to the recipients; some become more aggressive, including offline contact or attempts at offline contact.

While some of the perpetrators of these solicitations are the older, adult men depicted in recent media stories, many of the solicitors, when their age is known, appear to be other youth and younger adults and even some women. Even among the aggressive solicitors, a surprising number appear to be young and female. The diversity of those making sexual solicitations is an important point to recognize for those planning prevention. For example, too narrow characterization of the threat was a problem that hampered prevention efforts in regard to child molestation a generation ago. Those responding to Internet hazards should be careful not to make the same mistake. Not all of the sexual aggression on the Internet fits the image of the sexual predator or the wily child molester. A lot of it looks and sounds like the hallways of our high schools.
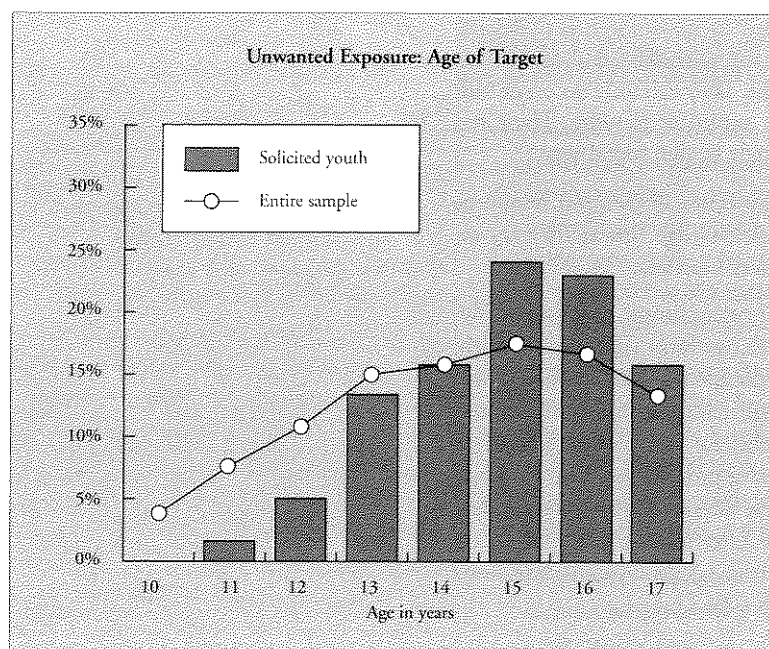
Figure 21-3. *Unwanted exposure to sexual material online to youth ages 10 to 17 years old. (NOTE: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.)* Reprinted with permission from NCMEC.

Perhaps the most discouraging finding about sexual solicitations is that parents and reporting authorities do not seem to be hearing about the majority of these episodes. Youth may be embarrassed, may not know what to do, and may simply have accepted this unpleasant reality of the Internet. Obviously any attempt to address this problem would benefit from a more open climate of discussion and reporting.

UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

While it is easy to access pornography on the Internet, what makes the Internet appear particularly risky to many parents is the impression that young people can encounter pornography there inadvertently. It is common to hear stories about children researching school reports or looking up movie stars and finding themselves subjected to offensive depictions or descriptions.

To assess the problem of unwanted exposure to sexual material, the survey asked youth about 2 kinds of online experiences: (1) while conducting an online search or surfing the Web, seeing pictures of naked people or of people having sex when they did not want to be in that kind of site and (2) opening an e-mail, instant message, or a link in a message that showed them actual pictures of naked people or people having sex that they did not want to receive.

YOUTH WITH UNWANTED EXPOSURES TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

Boys were slightly more likely than girls to have experienced an unwanted exposure (57% to 42%). More than 60% of the unwanted exposures occurred to youth who were 15 years of age or older (**Figure 21-3** and **Table 21-6**). Seven percent of the

Table 21-6. Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material (n = 1501)		
INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS	ALL INCIDENTS (N = 376) 25% OF YOUTH	DISTRESSING INCIDENTS (N = 91) 6% OF YOUTH
Age of youth		
10	—	—
11	2%	1%
12	5%	5%
13	13%	21%
14	16%	18%
15	24%	22%
16	23%	15%
17	16%	18%
Gender of youth		
Male	57%	55%
Female	42%	45%

(continued)

Table 21-6. *(continued)*

EPISODE CHARACTERISTICS	ALL (N=393)	DISTRESSING (N=92)
Location of computer		
Home	67%	61%
School	15%	16%
Someone else's home	13%	16%
Library	3%	3%
Some other place	2%	3%
Type of material youth saw or heard*		
Pictures of naked person(s)	94%	92%
Pictures of people having sex	38%	42%
Pictures that also included violence	8%	9%
How youth was exposed		
Surfing the Web	71%	72%
Opening e-mail or clicking on e-mail link	28%	30%
Youth could tell site was X-rated before entering	17%	12%

SURFING EXPOSURE	ALL (N=281)	DISTRESSING (N=66)
How Web site came up		
Link came up as the result of a search	47%	36%
Misspelled Web address	17%	18%
Clicked on the link when in other site	17%	24%
Other	15%	18%
Do not know	3%	3%
Youth has gone back to Web site	2%	—
Youth was taken into another X-rated site when exiting the first one	26%	33%

E-MAIL EXPOSURE	ALL (N=112)	DISTRESSING (N=26)
Youth received e-mail at a personal address	63%	58%
E-mail sender unknown	93%	96%

EPISODE CHARACTERISTICS (SURFING AND E-MAIL)	ALL (N=393)	DISTRESSING (N=92)
Incident known or disclosed to*		
Parent	39%	43%
Friend/Sibling	30%	33%
Another adult	2%	2%
Teacher or school person	3%	9%
Internet Service Provider/CyberTipline	3%	4%
Police or other authority	—	—
Someone else	1%	—
No one	44%	39%

(continued)

Table 21-6. Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material (n=1501) *(continued)*		
EPISODE CHARACTERISTICS (SURFING AND E-MAIL)	(N=393)	(N=92)
Youth was very/extremely upset	23%	100%[†]
Youth with no/low levels of upset	76%	—
Youth was very/extremely embarrassed about the incident	20%	48%
Stress Symptoms*[‡] Felt jumpy or irritable Lost interest in things	2% 1%	7% 7%
Presence of five or more depression symptoms[§][‖]	11%	15%

* *Multiple responses possible.*

† *Degree of upset was used to define this category of youth.*

‡ *These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.*

§ *In the entire sample, 8% of youth (n = 117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.*

‖ *The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.*

NOTE: *Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.*

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unwanted exposures were to 11- and 12-year-old youth. None of the 10-year-olds reported unwanted exposures. The somewhat greater exposure of boys may reflect that boys tend to allow their curiosity to draw them closer to such encounters. But the relatively small difference should not be overemphasized. Nearly a quarter of boys and girls had such exposures. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to say the exposure was distressing.

EXPOSURE INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS
Ninety-four percent of the unwanted images were of naked persons (**Table 21-6**). Thirty-eight percent showed people having sex. Eight percent involved violence, in addition to nudity and/or sex. Most of the unwanted exposures (67%) happened at home, but 15% happened at school. Three percent happened in libraries. Unfortunately, we do not know how many of the exposures involved child pornography. Important as this question is, we had decided that our youth respondents could not be reliable informants about the ages of individuals appearing in the pictures they viewed.

For the youth who encountered the material while surfing, the pornography came up as a result of searches (47%), misspelled addresses (17%), and links in Web sites (17%). For youth who encountered the material through e-mail, 63% of unwanted exposures came to an address used solely by the youth. In 93% of instances, the sender was unknown to the youth.

In 17% of all unwanted exposure incidents, the youth said they *did* know the site was X-rated before entering. (These were all encounters described earlier as unwanted or unexpected.) This group of episodes was not distinguishable in any fashion from the other 83% of episodes, including the likelihood of being distressing. Almost half of these incidents (48%) were disclosed to parents. It is not

clear to what extent curiosity or navigational naïveté resulted in the opening of the sites in spite of the prior knowledge.

Pornography sites are sometimes programmed to make them difficult to exit. In fact, in some sites the exit buttons take a viewer into other sexually explicit sites. In 26% of unwanted exposure incidents, youth reported they were brought to another sex site when they tried to exit the original site. This happened in one third of distressing incidents. **Table 21-7** gives some examples of what youth said they encountered.

YOUTH RESPONSE TO UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL
Parents found out or were told in 39% of the episodes (**Table 21-6**). Youth disclosed the incidents to no one in 44% of incidents. Authority figures were notified in a few cases; most frequently, youth disclosed to a teacher or school official (3% of incidents) and to Internet Service Providers (ie, 3% of incidents). None of these incidents were reported to law enforcement. Only 2% of youth encountering unwanted exposures said that they later returned to the site of the exposure. None of the youth with distressing exposures returned.

That so many youth did not mention their exposure to anyone (even to a friend to laugh about the experience or talk about it as an adventure) is noteworthy. It probably reflects some degree of guilt on the part of many youth. Perhaps if youth were talking about these experiences more, it might be healthier and helpful.

IMPACT OF EXPOSURE
Twenty-three percent of youth were very or extremely upset by the exposure (**Table 21-6**). This amounts to 6% of regular Internet users. Twenty percent of youth were very or extremely embarrassed. Twenty percent reported at least 1 symptom of stress (staying away from the Internet; not being able to stop thinking about the incident; feeling jumpy or irritable; and/or losing interest in things) "more than a little" or "all the time" after the incident.

YOUTH AT RISK FOR UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL
An important step necessary to inform the national debate about polices regarding youth and Internet pornography is to identify youth at risk for unwanted exposure to

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Table 21-7. Testimony From Youth Regarding Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material

— An 11-year-old boy and a friend were searching for game sites. They typed in "fun.com" and a pornography site came up.

— A 15-year-old boy looking for information about his family's Ford Escort typed "escort" into a search engine and found unwanted material.

— Another 15-year-old boy was writing a paper about wolves for school. He came across a bestiality site and saw a picture of a woman having sex with a wolf.

— A 16-year-old girl came upon a pornography site when she mistyped "teen.com." She had typed "teeen" instead.

— A 13-year-old boy who loved wrestling got an e-mail message with a subject line that said it was about wrestling. When he opened the message, it contained pornography.

— A 12-year-old girl received an e-mail message with a subject line that said "Free Beanie Babies." When she opened it, she saw a picture of naked people.

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sexual material on the Internet. Findings from a logistic regression analysis reveal at-risk youth to be older (14-17 years old), troubled, have high rates of Internet use, use e-mail and chat rooms, use the Internet at households other than their own, talk with strangers online, and engage in high online risk behavior (Mitchell et al, 2003) (**Table 21-5**). Again, as is the case with youth at risk for online sexual solicitation, caution needs to be taken not to create too narrow a focus on youth who are troubled and exhibit high and risky Internet use. In the cases of unwanted exposure, nearly half (45%) of youth reporting exposure were *not* troubled, high Internet users, or high online risk takers.

SUMMARY

Unwanted exposure to sexual material appears to be widespread, occurring to a quarter of all youth who used the Internet regularly during the last year. While it is not a new thing for young people to be exposed to sexual material, the degree of sudden, unexpected, and unwanted exposure may be made more common by the widespread use of the Internet. Such exposure occurs primarily to older youth, but some youth as young as 11 years old reported exposure. Even in the older group, the exposure does not merely evoke laughs or mild discomfort. About a quarter of the exposed youth, 6% of all regular users, said they were very or extremely upset by an exposure. As with sexual solicitations, most exposure incidents, even the distressing ones, do not get reported to adults or other people in authority although a proportion of these incidents are disclosed to friends and siblings.

The experiences reported in our survey conform quite readily to anecdotal accounts from youth and adult users. Unwanted exposures mostly occur when doing Internet searches, misspelling addresses, or clicking on links. More than one third of the imagery was of sexual acts rather than simply naked people, perhaps more than people would guess, and 8% involved some violence in addition to nudity and sex.

From a social science view, the issues about youth exposure to unwanted sexual imagery are difficult to evaluate, in part, because there is almost no previous research on the matter. No one knows the actual effects. The research regarding exposure to advertising and media violence makes it clear that media exposure can affect attitudes, engender fears, and model behaviors (ie, pro- and anti-social).

Previous research about exposure to pornography is not relevant to the many issues of concern here. This research has been conducted with adults and is based on an assumption of voluntary exposure. The present study shows that in the case of unwanted exposure there are strong negative, subjective feelings for certain youth and certain youth who manifest symptoms of stress. We do not know how long these feelings or symptoms last or what ramifications they have, but these symptoms and feelings should be cause for concern. Questions of particular interest that need priority attention for future investigation are the following:

— Do any of the children so exposed have full-fledged, clinical-level traumatic reactions or other highly disturbed reactions?

— Is there any influence, traumatic or otherwise, on children's developing attitudes and feelings about sex?

— Do children with unwanted exposure relate to future Internet sexual material in different ways, that is, either more avoidant or more attracted?

— Do Internet exposures to sexual material figure negatively in family dynamics, thereby creating conflicts or barriers in any way?

Nonetheless, for many people, the issues about youth exposure are more basic than its effects. Whatever the effects, they would argue that people in general, and young people in particular, have a right to be free from unwanted intrusion of sexually

oriented material in a public forum such as the Internet. On this point, some of the constitutional debate about the Internet has concerned what kind of forum the Internet is. Is it a forum like a bookstore, where if it is signposted, people can readily stay away from the sexually explicit material if they so choose? Or is it more like a television channel, where people are much more captive of the material that is projected at them? Clearly, the Internet has aspects of both; however, the present research does suggest that, in its current form, it is not simple for those who want to avoid sexual material on the Internet to do so.

HARASSMENT

Although less publicized than sexual solicitation and unwanted exposure to sexual material, youth have reported other threatening and offensive behavior directed to them on the Internet, including threats to assault or harm the youth, their friends, family, or property as well as efforts to embarrass or humiliate them. Once again, the concern of parents and other officials is that the anonymity of the Internet may make it a fertile territory for such behaviors.

To assess the problem of harassment on the Internet, the study asked youth about 2 kinds of incidents: feeling worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing them online and having someone using the Internet to threaten or embarrass them by posting or sending messages about them for other people to see.

YOUTH TARGETS FOR HARASSMENT

Boys and girls were targeted about equally for harassment (ie, 51% and 48% respectively). Seventy percent of the episodes occurred to youth 14 years old and older (**Figure 21-4** and **Table 21-8**). Eighteen percent of targeted youth were between the ages of 10 and 12.
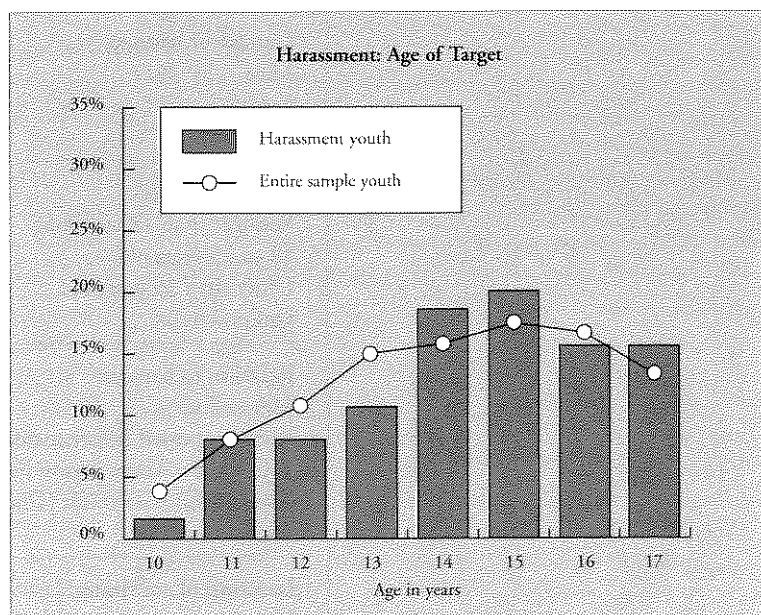
Figure 21-4. Youth as targets for harassment, ages 10 to 17 years old. (NOTE: Adds up to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.) Reprinted with permission from NCMEC.

Table 21-8. Online Harassment of Youth (n = 1501)		
INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS	ALL INCIDENTS (N=95) 6% OF YOUTH	DISTRESSING INCIDENTS (N=37) 2% OF YOUTH
Age of youth		
10	2%	5%
11	8%	8%
12	8%	8%
13	11%	11%
14	18%	27%
15	20%	13%
16	16%	22%
17	16%	5%
		(continued)

Table 21-8. Online Harassment of Youth (n = 1501) *(continued)*

Individual Characteristics	(N = 95)	(N = 37)
Gender of youth		
Male	51%	43%
Female	48%	57%

Episode Characteristics	All (N = 96)	Distressing (N = 37)
Gender of harasser		
Male	54%	51%
Female	20%	24%
Unknown	26%	24%
Age of harasser		
Younger than 18 years old	63%	65%
18 to 25 years old	13%	16%
Older than 25 years old	1%	—
Unknown	23%	19%
Relation to harasser		
Met online	72%	65%
Knew in person before incident	28%	35%
Youth knew where person lived	35%	24%
Person lived near youth (1 hour drive or less)	43%	35%
Location of computer*		
Home	76%	81%
Someone else's home	13%	5%
School	6%	5%
Library	1%	3%
Some other place	2%	3%
Was not using a computer[†]	2%	3%
Place on Internet incident first happened		
Using instant messages	33%	41%
Chat room	32%	22%
E-mail	19%	22%
Specific Web page	7%	8%
Game room, message board, newsgroup, or other	6%	5%
Do not know	2%	3%
Forms of offline contact[† ‡]		
Sent regular mail	9%	4%
Asked to meet somewhere	6%	4%
Called on telephone	4%	—
Came to house	1%	—
Gave money, gifts, or other things	1%	—

Table 21-8. *(continued)*

Episode Characteristics	(N = 96)	(N = 37)
Bought plane, train, or bus ticket	—	—
None of the above	88%	96%
How situation ended		
Logged off	19%	22%
Blocked that person	17%	11%
Left site	13%	16%
Told the person to stop	11%	16%
Stopped without youth doing anything	10%	11%
Changed screen name, profile, or e-mail address	3%	3%
Called police or other authorities	2%	—
Other	27%	22%
Incident known or disclosed to[†]		
Parent	50%	51%
Friend or sibling	36%	38%
Internet Service Provider/CyberTipline	21%	24%
Teacher or school person	6%	11%
Another adult	1%	3%
Police or other authority	1%	—
Someone else	4%	8%
No one	24%	22%
Distress: Very/extremely[†]		
Upset	31%	81%
Afraid	19%	49%
Youth with no/low levels of upset, embarrassment, and fear	69%	—
Youth were very/extremely embarrassed about the incident	18%	35%
Stress symptoms (more than a little or all the time)[† §]		
At least one of following:	32%	49%
Stayed away from Internet	23%	30%
Thought about it and could not stop	20%	38%
Felt jumpy or irritable	6%	16%
Lost interest in things	3%	5%
Presence of five or more depression symptoms[‖ ¶]	18%	22%

* *These youth had information posted about them online by other people.*

† *Multiple responses possible.*

‡ *Only youth who did not know the harasser prior to the incident were asked this question (ie, n = 69 for all incidents and n = 24 for distressing incidents).*

§ *These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.*

‖ *In the entire sample, 8% of youth (ie, n = 117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.*

¶ *The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.*

NOTE: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

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PERPETRATORS OF THE HARASSMENT
More than one quarter of the perpetrators (28%) were offline friends or acquaintances of the youth (**Table 21-8**). A majority (54%) were reported to be male, but 20% were reportedly female, and in 26% of instances, the perpetrator's gender was unknown. Nearly two thirds (63%) of harassment perpetrators were other juveniles. Almost a quarter of harassment perpetrators (24%) lived near the youth (within 1 a hour drive). In distressing episodes, 35% of perpetrators lived near the youth. In contrast to the sexual solicitation episodes in which only 3% of perpetrators were known to the youth offline, approximately one quarter of the harassment episodes involved known persons and persons living relatively close to the youth.

HARASSMENT INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS
Slightly more than three quarters of the youth were logged onto their computers at home when the harassment occurred (**Table 21-8**). The harassment primarily took the form of instant messages (33%), chat room exchanges (32%), and e-mails (19%). Twelve percent of the harassment episodes involving perpetrators who were not face-to-face acquaintances of the youth included attempts at offline contact by telephone, regular mail, or in person. **Table 21-9** provides some examples of the ways youth described their harassment incidents.

YOUTH RESPONSE TO HARASSMENT
Parents found out or were told about these episodes half the time (**Table 21-8**). Slightly more than one third of the youth told their friends. Twenty-one percent of the episodes were reported to Internet Service Providers, 6% to teachers, and 1% to a law enforcement agency. Twenty-four percent of harassment incidents were undisclosed. It is noteworthy that, compared to sexual solicitations and exposures, a larger proportion of the harassment episodes were reported to parents and authority figures.

IMPACT OF HARASSMENT
Thirty-one percent of the harassment episodes were very or extremely upsetting, and 19% were very or extremely frightening (**Table 21-8**). Eighteen percent were very or extremely embarrassing. Almost one third of the harassed youth (32%) reported at least 1 symptom of stress (staying away from the Internet; not being able to stop thinking about the incident; feeling jumpy or irritable; and/or losing interest in things) "more than a little" or "all the time" after the incident. Almost half of the youth with distressing experiences had at least one symptom of stress. Eighteen percent of the harassed youth were depressed at the time of their interview, which was more than twice the rate for the overall sample. Most of the harassed youth described the episode as mildly distressing, but an important subgroup was quite distressed.

SUMMARY
Sexual offenses against youth on the Internet have received the most attention, but this study suggests harassment deserves concern as well. Harassment does not occur as frequently as sexual solicitation or unwanted exposure to sexual material, but it is a problem encountered by a significant group of youth. The dark side of the Internet is not all about sex; it includes hostility and maliciousness as well.

An important feature of the harassment is that, more than sexual solicitation, it involves people known to the youth and people known to live nearby. Certainly, some of the threatening character of these episodes entails targets do not feel completely protected by distance and anonymity. The harasser could actually carry out his or her threats.

Importantly, the harassed youth were substantially more likely than the sexually solicited youth to tell someone and report the episode to an authority. Nonetheless, the percentage of youth reporting harassment to people in authority is quite low, thereby pointing to a need to publicize and educate families about available help sources.

Table 21-9. Testimony From Youth Regarding Harassment

— A 17-year-old girl said people who were mad at her made a "hate page" about her.

— A 14-year-old boy said he received instant messages from someone who said he was hiding in the boy's house with a laptop. The boy was home alone at the time and was very frightened.

— A 14-year-old girl said people at school found a note from her boyfriend, scanned it, posted it on the Web, and sent it by e-mail throughout her school.

— A 12-year-old girl said someone posted a note about her on the Web. The note swore at her and called her sexual names.

RISKS AND REMEDIES

Our lack of knowledge about the dimensions and dynamics of the problems this new technology has created for young people is a barrier to devising effective solutions. Even in the absence of knowledge, however, there has been no dearth of suggestions about things to do. Parents have been urged to supervise their children and talk with them about the perils and dangers of the Internet, and organizations have been established to monitor and investigate suspicious episodes. Have any of these remedies been taken to heart?

The survey asked various questions to find out more about the prospects for prevention. We wanted to determine to what degree parents were monitoring and advising their children about Internet activities. We asked about parents' and youth's knowledge about what remedies or information sources are available for them when they do run into problems.

PARENTAL CONCERN

Parents and youth believed that adults should be concerned about the problem of young people being exposed to sexual material on the Internet. As might be expected, parents thought adults should be more concerned than youth thought adults should be, with 84% of parents saying adults should be extremely concerned compared to only 46% of the youth. Some inflation of concern might be expected in a survey with this topic, but other surveys confirm that this is an issue of substantial immediacy for parents and youth.

USE OF FILTERING AND BLOCKING SOFTWARE

Thirty-three percent of households were using filtering or blocking software at the time of the interview. By far the most common option used was the access control offered by America Online (AOL) to its subscribers, used by 12% of the households with home Internet access or 35% of households using filtering or blocking software. Interestingly, another 5% of the households in our sample had used some kind of filtering or blocking software during the year, but were no longer doing so, thereby suggesting some possible dissatisfaction with its use.

KNOWLEDGE OF HELP SOURCES

We noted earlier that few of the Internet episodes youth reported (ie, solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, or harassment) were reported to official sources. One possibility is that youth and their families are not all that familiar with places interested in or receptive to such reports. Almost one third of parents or guardians said they had heard of places where troublesome Internet episodes could be

reported, but only approximately 10% of them could cite a specific name or authority. Only 24% of youth stated they had heard of places to report; only 17% could actually name a place. Reporting the episode to the Internet Service Provider (most often AOL) was the option most often remembered.

STUDY CONCLUSIONS

By providing more texture and details to our picture of the cyber hazards facing youth, the national Youth Internet Safety Survey has much to contribute to current public policy discussions about what to do to improve the safety of young people. **Table 21-10** lists some key conclusions and recommendations based on the important findings from the study, and more detail is provided within the text that follows.

MANY YOUTH ENCOUNTER OFFENSIVE EXPERIENCES ON THE INTERNET

The percentage of youth who encounter offensive experiences (19% sexually solicited, 25% exposed to unwanted sexual material, 6% harassed) are figures for 1 year only. The number of youth encountering such experiences from the time they start using the Internet until they are 17 years old, which might include 5 or more years of Internet activity, would be higher.

The level of offensive behavior reported in this study might be placed in this perspective. Any workplace or commercial establishment in which one fifth of all employees or clients were sexually solicited annually would be in serious trouble. What if a quarter of all young visitors to the local supermarket were exposed to unwanted pornography? Would this be tolerated? Suppose 1 in 17 subway riders were threatened and harassed each year. There would certainly be a strong law enforcement presence in the subway as a result. We consider these levels of offensiveness unacceptable in most contexts. But on the Internet, will we simply accept it as the price for this new technology because it is anonymous? It certainly does confirm people's concerns about the coarseness and crudeness of the Internet experience. Sadly, the Internet is not always the nice, safe, educational, and recreational environment that we might have hoped for our young people.

THE OFFENSES AND OFFENDERS ARE MORE DIVERSE THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT

The problem highlighted in this study is not just adult males trolling for sex. Much of the offending behavior comes from other youth. There is also a substantial amount

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Table 21-10. Major Findings and Conclusions

— Many youth encounter offensive experiences on the Internet.

— The offenses and offenders are more diverse that previously thought.

— Most sexual solicitations fail, but their quantity remains alarming.

— Teenagers are the primary vulnerable population.

— Sexually explicit material on the Internet is intrusive.

— Most youth brush off these offenses, but some become distressed.

— Many youth do not tell anyone about the experience.

— Youth and parents do not report these experiences and do not know where to report them.

— Internet friendships between teenagers and adults are common and seem to usually be benign.

from females. The nonsexual offenses are numerous and quite serious, too. We need to keep this diversity in mind. Sexual victimization on the Internet should not be the only thing that grabs public attention.

MOST SEXUAL SOLICITATIONS FAIL, BUT THEIR QUANTITY REMAINS ALARMING

Based on current Internet use statistics, we estimate that 4.5 million young people between the ages of 10 and 17 years old are propositioned on the Internet every year. Even if only a small percentage of these encounters results in offline sexual assault or illegal sexual contact, which is a percentage smaller than we could detect in this survey, it would amount to several thousand incidents. The good news is that most young people seem to know what to do to deflect these sexual "come-ons." But there are youth who may be especially vulnerable through ignorance, neediness, disability, or poor judgment. The wholesale solicitation for sex on the Internet is worrisome for that reason.

TEENAGERS ARE THE PRIMARY VULNERABLE POPULATION

For solicitations, as well as unwanted exposures to sexual material and harassment, most of the targets were teenagers, especially teenagers who were 14 years of age and older. Thus, it is misleading to say that child molesters are moving from the playground to the living room, trading in their trench coats for digicams, as some have characterized the situation. Children and teenagers are different victim populations. Preteen children use the Internet less, in more limited ways (US Department of Commerce, 2002; Roberts et al, 1999), and are less independent. It does not appear that much predatory behavior over the Internet involves conventional pedophiles targeting 8-year-old children with their modems, at least not yet. Teenagers are the target population for this Internet victimization, and that makes prevention and intervention a different sort of challenge since teenagers are more independent and do not necessarily listen to what parents and other "authorities" tell them.

SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL ON THE INTERNET IS INTRUSIVE

A large percentage of youthful Internet users are exposed to sexually explicit material when they are not looking for it. This occurs most often through largely innocent misspellings as well as the opening of e-mail, Web sites, and other documents. Sex found on the Internet is not nicely segregated and signposted like in a bookstore, and it is not easily avoidable. Some heavy-duty imagery is incredibly easy to stumble upon. Apparently many people who do not know this yet are inclined to think, "I don't see it, so it must be something you only get if you go looking." But youth do not have to be all that active in exploring the Internet to run across this material inadvertently.

MOST YOUTH BRUSH OFF THESE OFFENSES, BUT SOME BECOME DISTRESSED

Most youth are not bothered much by what they encounter on the Internet, but there is an important subgroup of youth who are quite distressed by the exposure as well as the threats and solicitations. We can not assume that these are just transient effects. When youth report stress symptoms like intrusive thoughts and physical discomfort, these are warning signs. Some of this could be the psychological equivalent of a concussion rather than a slight bump on the head. It may be hard to predict exactly who will get hurt. It may depend partly on things like age, previous experience (with the Internet and sexual matters), family attitudes, the degree of surprise, and the kind of exposure. Anticipating and responding to negative impacts is something that needs more consideration.

MANY YOUTH DO NOT TELL ANYONE ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE

Nearly half of the solicitations were not disclosed. Some of this nondisclosure certainly results from feelings of embarrassment and guilt. The higher disclosure rates for the

nonsexual offenses point to that. Parents are not being informed about a lot of these episodes, and they would want to know. Some youth are not even telling their friends. Thus, they are not getting a chance to reflect about what happened, process it, and obtain ideas about ways to deal with the episodes and ways to put these episodes in perspective. Ironically, the Internet is providing places to discuss difficult topics, while at the same time may be increasing the number of difficult topics to discuss.

YOUTH AND PARENTS DO NOT REPORT THESE EXPERIENCES AND DO NOT KNOW WHERE TO REPORT THEM

Most parents and youth did not know where to report the incidents or obtain help for Internet offenses. The low rate of reporting for actual offenses confirms this lack of awareness. Even the most serious episodes were rarely reported. The Internet is a new "country" and people do not yet know who the "cops" or authority figures are. In fact, this seems to be part of the attraction of this territory for many, that is, that there are not obvious cops or authority figures. People do, however, need to know ways to obtain help, and people with antisocial tendencies need to know that there are consequences. The choice is not between anarchy and "Big Brother," just as in regular politics the choice is not between anarchy and dictatorship.

INTERNET FRIENDSHIPS BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND ADULTS ARE COMMON AND USUALLY SEEM TO BE BENIGN

It would make prevention easier if Internet relationships between youth and adults were uniformly sinister, and we could simply say, "Don't do it." But one of the positive things about the Internet is that it allows people of diverse social statuses to congregate around common interests.

We want young people to develop their skills and talents. We want them to find mentors. The existence of coaches who molest does not deter parents from signing their kids up for Little League. It will be a similarly complicated challenge to protect kids from the dangerous Internet relationships without squelching the positive ones. We need to learn more about the signs and symptoms of adult-youth relationships that are potentially exploitative, not just on the Internet, but in face-to-face relationships, too.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations follow from these major findings and conclusions. They are listed in **Table 21-11** and more fully described in the following sections.

CREATE MATERIALS SPECIFICALLY DESCRIBING DIVERSE HAZARDS

Those concerned about preventing sexual exploitation on the Internet need to mention the diversity of hazards, including threats from youthful and female offenders, in their materials. A stereotype of the adult Internet predator or pedophile has come to dominate much of the discussion about Internet victimization. While such figures exist and may be among the most dangerous of Internet threats, this survey has revealed a more diverse array of individuals making offensive and potentially exploitative online overtures. We should not ignore these offenders. We must remember that in a previous generation, campaigns to prevent child molestation characterized the threat as "playground predators," so for years the problem of youthful, acquaintance, and intrafamily perpetrators went unrecognized. Today, those doing prevention work concerning the Internet need to be careful not to make a characterization of the threat that fails to encompass all its forms whether consciously or inadvertently. One of the reasons for the mistaken characterization of child molesters in an earlier era was that people extrapolated the problem entirely from what came to the attention of law enforcement officials. A similar process could currently be underway in the case of Internet victimization, but it is probably early enough to reverse. Therefore, we need to publicize the full variety of Internet offensive behavior.

Table 21-11. Recommendations

— Those concerned about preventing sexual exploitation on the Internet need to specifically mention the diversity of hazards, including threats from youthful and female offenders, in their materials.

— Prevention planners and law enforcement officials need to address the problem of non-sexual as well as sexual victimization on the Internet.

— More of the Internet-using public needs to know about the existence of help sources for Internet offenses, and the reporting of offensive Internet behavior needs to be made even easier, more immediate, and more important.

— Different prevention and intervention strategies need to be developed for youth of different ages.

— Youth need to be mobilized in a campaign to help "clean up" the standards of Internet behavior and take responsibility for youth-oriented parts of the Internet.

— We need to train mental health, school, and family counselors about these new Internet hazards and the ways these hazards contribute to personal distress and other psychological and interpersonal problems.

— Much more research is needed on the developmental impact of unwanted exposure to pornographic images among children of differing ages.

— More understanding is needed about families' knowledge of, attitudes about, and experience with filtering and blocking software.

— Laws are needed to ensure that offensive acts that are illegal in other contexts will also be illegal on the Internet.

— Concern about Internet victimization should not eclipse prevention and intervention efforts to combat other conventional forms of youth victimization.

ADDRESS BOTH SEXUAL AND NONSEXUAL INTERNET VICTIMIZATION

Prevention planners and law enforcement officials need to address the problem of nonsexual as well as sexual victimization on the Internet. An additional problem with the "Internet predator" stereotype just mentioned is that it does not give enough focus to nonsexual forms of Internet victimization. The current study shows that nonsexual threats and harassment constitute another common peril for youth that can be as or more distressing than sexual overtures. Experience in crime prevention has shown that concerns about sexual threats often eclipse other equally serious crimes. Concerted efforts should be made to ensure that nonsexual threats and harassment are included on the agendas of educators, practitioners, legislators, and law enforcement officials regarding Internet safety.

INFORM THE PUBLIC OF HELP RESOURCES AND MAKE REPORTING OF OFFENSIVE INTERNET BEHAVIOR EASIER

More of the Internet-using public needs to know about the existence of help sources for Internet offenses, and the reporting of offensive Internet behavior needs to be made even easier, more immediate, and more important. Multiple strategies are needed to increase reporting. The Internet-using public needs to be aware of reporting options in as many ways as possible, that is, through the Internet as well as through other avenues. The public needs to be briefed on the reasons they should

make such reports, including the importance of keeping the Internet a safe and enjoyable place for everyone to use. Smokey the Bear and McGruff the Crime Dog campaigns come to mind as approaches to emulate. People balk at being tattle-tales, but citizen vigilance and community involvement have traditionally been the keys to maintaining community safety.

DEVELOPMENT OF PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH OF VARYING AGES

Different prevention and intervention strategies need to be developed for youth of different ages. Most of the encounters reported to our study occurred to teenagers, specifically older teenagers. The messages that will make sense and be taken seriously by this group and their parents differ significantly from those that make sense for younger youth. This is a different problem from conventional child molestation, where we try to target and protect 7- to 13-year-olds. Older teenagers presumably have more independence, more experience, and a different relationship with adults and their families. For example, advice to tell parents to check the Internet and e-mail activity of older teenagers may be tantamount to saying parents should read their children's mail, a privacy invasion that seems unrealistic in many families. Good protection strategies, especially for the teenage group, can not be heavy on the control dimension and need to be tied to youth aspirations, values, and culture. This requires the input of youth. If young people are becoming millionaires with their Internet ingenuity, it is likely that some of that creativity could hit the jackpot in the field of Internet safety as well. It is time to involve a cadre of young people in the development of Internet victimization prevention in order to craft messages to which youth will be receptive.

MOBILIZE YOUTH TO HELP "CLEAN UP" INTERNET BEHAVIOR STANDARDS

Youth need to be mobilized in a campaign to help "clean up" the standards of Internet behavior and take responsibility for youth-oriented parts of the Internet. Like face-to-face sexual offenses, which run the gamut from rape to harassment, Internet sexual offenses have been shown in this study to cover a spectrum of behaviors. The less serious end of the spectrum should not be ignored, since it can be the fertile soil in which more serious offenses grow. Much has been learned over the years about reducing crime, social deviance, and public disorder in communities. Many of those lessons are adaptable to the Internet, which is a community, albeit one with special properties. In the crime field, for example, success in reducing crime has been achieved through more community policing and cleaning up minor kinds of neighborhood disorder and decay. Crime-watch campaigns that deputize and empower community members to watch for crime have worked to reduce theft. In the education field, school revitalization campaigns have helped improve decorum and reduce antisocial behaviors in the schools. Thought should be given to applying such lessons to the Internet community. For example, the experience of those wanting to prevent real-world sexual harassment has been that campaigns, particularly campaigns involving whole schools, can be successful if they raise awareness about the problem and its effects and if they help youth enforce proper conduct among the peers themselves. Such youth-oriented campaigns might have some success with at least some forms of Internet victimization as well, and these campaigns may be worth a try.

EDUCATE HEALTH, SCHOOL, AND FAMILY COUNSELORS ABOUT THE NEW INTERNET HAZARDS

We need to train mental health, school, and family counselors about these new Internet hazards and the ways these hazards contribute to personal distress and other psychological and interpersonal problems. This study reveals that substantial numbers of young people do experience distress because of Internet encounters, and they are not getting help. Mental health and other counselors need to learn to be alert and ask

questions to get young people to talk about such encounters. These counselors need to know the ways that young people use the Internet so they can understand the problems of these young people. Counselors also need to be trained to treat the kinds of distress and conflicts that have a connection with negative Internet experiences. We need educational packages for schools and various youth workers for their own professional development and to use with the kids. Unfortunately, at the training conferences being offered today, most Internet education seems directed at law enforcement officials. We need to develop workshops for the educators, practitioners, psychologists, and social workers as well.

MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED

More research is needed on the developmental impact of unwanted exposure to pornographic images among children of different ages. The Internet is almost certainly increasing the frequency and the explicitness of such exposures, but even more important, the Internet is increasing the number of youth exposed involuntarily and suddenly. Although this topic has commanded some public attention, little research has been conducted. Even if the vast majority of such encounters are trivial or benign, however, it would be important to know under what conditions such encounters can be influential or stressful and what kinds of interventions are useful to prevent negative influence. The domain of influences could be broad and could include attitudes about sex, attitudes about the Internet, and matters of family dynamics. These are not easy matters to study in an ethical and dispassionate way; however, it can be done and should be made a priority.

BETTER UNDERSTANDING IS NEEDED ABOUT FAMILIES' IDEAS ABOUT AND USE OF FILTERING AND BLOCKING SOFTWARE

More understanding is needed about families' knowledge of, attitudes about, and experience with filtering and blocking software. This study found that only a minority of families with children were using blocking or filtering software even though most parents said adults should be very or extremely concerned about the problem of Internet victimization. Blocking and filtering software is one main line of defense available to families who are concerned about the problem. It is the defense being strongly advocated by people opposed to legislative solutions. Why is it not being used more often?

The lack of use of such software may reflect a lack of knowledge about its availability, suspicions about its utility, or a lack of suitability of such software in the context of real family dynamics and Internet use practices. For example, the introduction of such software may provoke conflicts between adults and youth or at least create fears about such conflicts. It is interesting that 5% of the families we interviewed had used filtering or blocking software in the past year and then discontinued its use.

Before recommending that more families use such software, it is important to know more about its operation. If a lack of knowledge is the problem, then education and awareness can be the answer. If the software does not suit the concerns of families or is difficult to use in real family contexts, then new designs or approaches to this software may be needed. We need detailed, real-life evaluation research about available Internet blocking and filtering technologies.

ENACT LAWS TO MAKE OFFENSIVE ACTS ILLEGAL ON THE INTERNET

Laws are needed to ensure that offensive acts that are illegal in other contexts will also be illegal on the Internet. Some of the offensive behaviors revealed in this study (especially sexual solicitations by adults of minors and some of the threatening harassment) are probably illegal under current law. Because most law was written prior to the development of the Internet, questions have been raised about whether and how various criminal statutes apply to Internet behavior. Although it is a daunting task, criminal statutes need to be reviewed systematically with the Internet in mind to make sure that relevant statutes cover Internet behaviors.

CONVENTIONAL FORMS OF YOUTH VICTIMIZATION NEED OUR CONTINUED ATTENTION

Concern about Internet victimization should not eclipse prevention and intervention efforts to combat other conventional forms of youth victimization. This study has revealed how many offensive and distressing experiences youth encounter on the Internet. Internet victimization has not become, nor is it threatening to become, the most serious crime peril in children's lives; rather, it is just the newest. Among regular Internet users in our survey, 30% had been physically attacked in real life by other youth in the last year, 1% had been physically abused by an adult, and 1% had been sexually assaulted. None of these serious offenses had any connection, as far as we can tell, to the Internet. None of the Internet threats we documented actually materialized into a face-to-face violent offense. We need to mobilize about Internet victimization because it is new, causes distress, could mushroom, and could otherwise escape attention. But the conventional crime perils in the lives of children and youth are all too real and continuing. As reported from the National Crime Victimization Survey, youth the age of the respondents in this survey have conventional violent crime victimization rates (eg, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) that are twice that of the adult population (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). Children and adolescents are the most criminally victimized segment in our society. So, as much as possible, efforts to address Internet victimization should combine with and not displace efforts to prevent youth crime victimization in general.

CONCLUSION

The study suggests that youth encounter a substantial quantity of offensive episodes, some of which are distressing and most of which are unreported. A comprehensive strategy to respond to the problem would aim to reduce the quantity of offensive behavior, better shield young people from its likely occurrence, increase the level of reporting, and provide more help to youth and families to protect them from any consequences.

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH MATERIALS

1. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at: http://www.missingkids. org. Provides materials and maintains an online reporting system.

2. The CyperTipline at: http://www.cybertipline.org. For reporting online victimizations.

3. Federal Bureau of Investigation's Innocent Images Program at: http://www.fbi. gov/hq /cid/cac/innocent.htm.

4. Information and Resources about the Commission on Online Child Protection (COPA) at: http://www.COPAcommission.org.

5. National Resource Council Project on Tools and Strategies for Protecting Kids from Pornography at: http://www7.nationalacademies.org/itas.

6. Internet Safety Education for Parents and Youth at: http://www.getnetwise.com.

7. CyberAngels at: http://www.cyberangels.org. Internet safety organization.

8. Digital chaperones for kids. *Consumer Reports.* March 2001;66:20-23.

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APPENDIX 21-1: METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

The final Youth Internet Safety Survey sample consisted of 796 boys and 705 girls between the ages of 10 and 17 (**Table 21-1**). The interviews were conducted between August 1999 and February 2000. This was not a representative sample of all youth within the United States because Internet use was not evenly distributed among the population during that time period. Internet users tended to have higher incomes and more education than non-Internet users; among lower-income groups, Internet users were more likely to be white although racial difference was disappearing at higher-income levels (NPR Report, 2000). While boys were somewhat more likely than girls to use the Internet, the difference was small and attributable to boys' propensity for computer games (Roberts et al, 1999). The sample for the Youth Internet Safety Survey generally matched other representative samples of youth Internet users at the time these interviews were conducted.

Households with children in the target age group were identified through another large household survey, the *Second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children* (NISMART-2), which was conducted by the Institute of Survey Research at Temple University between February 1999 and December 1999. NISMART-2 interviewers screened more than 180 000 telephone numbers to identify 16 000 households with children who were 18 years old and younger. Telephone numbers for households including young people between the ages of 9 and 17 were then forwarded to and dialed by interviewers for the Youth Internet Safety Survey.

Interviews for the Youth Internet Safety Survey were conducted by the staff members of an experienced national survey research firm, Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. Upon reaching a household, interviewers screened for regular Internet use by a child living in the household who was between the ages of 10 and 17. Internet use was defined as "connecting a computer or a TV to a phone or cable line to use things like the World Wide Web and e-mail." Interviewers identified the child in the household who used the Internet most often and then asked to speak with the parent who knew the most about the child's Internet use. Interviewers then conducted a short interview about household rules and parental concerns about Internet use, as well as demographic characteristics. At the end of the parent interview, the interviewer requested permission to speak with the previously identified youth. Parents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview, told that young participants would receive a $10 check, and informed that the interview would include questions about "sexual material your child may have seen."

With parental consent, interviewers described the study to the child and obtained his or her verbal consent. Youth interviews lasted about half an hour. They were scheduled

at the convenience of youth participants and arranged for times when they could talk freely and confidentially. Questions were constructed so that youth responses were mostly short, one-word answers that would not reveal anything meaningful to persons overhearing any portion of the conversation. Where longer answers were required, questions were phrased, "This may be something private. If you feel you can talk freely, or move to a place where you can talk freely, please tell me what happened." Youth were not pressed for answers. They were promised complete confidentiality and told they could skip any questions they did not want to answer and stop the interview at any time. The survey was conducted under the supervision of the University of New Hampshire's Institutional Review Board and conformed to the rules mandated by research projects funded by the US Department of Justice. Youth respondents received brochures about Internet safety as well a $10 check.

PARTICIPATION RATE
Based on standard calculations of participation rate, 75% of the households approached completed the screening necessary to determine their eligibility for participation in the survey. The completion rate among households with eligible respondents was 82%. Five percent of parents in eligible households refused the adult interview. Another 11% of parents completed the adult interview but refused permission for their child to participate in the youth interview. In 2% of eligible households, parents consented to the youth interview, but youth refused to participate. An additional 1% of eligible households was in "call-back" status when 1501 interviews were completed. (NOTE: As a result of rounding, these numbers add up to 101%.)

APPENDIX 21-2: DEFINITIONS AND INSTRUMENTATION
The aspects of youth online victimization on which this study focused included sexual solicitations and approaches, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment. (See **Table 21-2** for a list of definitions.) The incidence rates for sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment were estimated based on a series of screener questions about unwanted experiences while using the Internet. Two of the screeners concerned harassment, 4 involved unwanted exposure to sexual material, 3 focused on sexual solicitation, and 1 question asked if anyone online had encouraged the youth to run away from home. More extensive follow-up questions were asked about up to 2 of the unwanted incidents per youth; these follow-up questions were used to further classify the reported episodes into the categories reported on in this chapter.

Follow-up questions were limited to only 2 reported incidents because of time constraints. Consequently, some incidents reported by young people were not followed up, and these were omitted from incidence rates. If a youth reported more than one incident in a particular category, the follow-up questions referred to the "most bothersome" incident or, if none was "most bothersome," the most recent incident. The limits on follow-up questions probably led to some undercounting of incidents, particularly episodes of unwanted exposure to sexual material.

SEXUAL SOLICITATION ITEMS
To assess the problem of sexual exploitation, the study asked several questions, the results of which were aggregated under the category of sexual solicitations and approaches. Questions were asked about:

1. Sexual approaches made to them in the past year—situations during which someone on the Internet attempted to get them to talk about sex when they did not want to or asked them unwanted intimate questions.

2. Sexual solicitations they had received in the last year from persons over the Internet who had asked them to do sexual things they did not want to do.

3. Invitations from Internet sources to help them run away, a ploy apparently favored by some individuals looking for vulnerable youth.

UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL ITEMS

We were also interested in *unwanted* exposures to sexual material, that is, those that occurred when the youth were not looking for or expecting to receive or see sexual material. We were interested in the following:

1. Encounters with sexual material appearing while doing searches online and surfing the Web

2. When a youth was opening an e-mail or clicking on message links

In the section on sexually explicit material, we focused on unwanted exposure to pictorial images of naked people or people having sex.

HARASSMENT ITEMS

The survey asked about the following kinds of situations that may have occurred in the last year:

1. Feeling worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing them online

2. Someone using the Internet to threaten or embarrass them by posting or sending messages about them for other people to see

APPENDIX 21-3: LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Every scientific study has limitations and defects. Readers should keep some of these important things in mind when considering the findings and conclusions of this study.

1. We can not be certain how candid our respondents were with us. Although we used widely accepted social science procedures, our interviews involved telephone conversations with young people regarding a sensitive subject, factors that could easily result in less than complete candor.

2. The young people to whom we did not talk may be different from the youth to whom we did speak. There were parents who refused to participate or refused to allow us to talk to their children; there were youth who refused to participate and those we could never reach. Our results might have been different if we had been able to talk of all these people.