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# The Internet and Family and Acquaintance Sexual Abuse

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*This article explores the dynamics of cases involving family and acquaintance sexual offenders who used the Internet to commit sex crimes against minors. Although the stereotype of Internet crimes involves unknown adults meeting juvenile victims online, Internet use can also play a role in sexual crimes against minors by family members and acquaintances. Data were collected from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about arrests for Internet-related sex crimes against minors. Family and acquaintance offenders were nearly as numerous as offenders who used the Internet to meet victims online. They used the Internet in various ways to further their crimes including as a tool to seduce or groom, store or disseminate sexual images of victims, arrange meetings and communicate, reward victims, or advertise or sell victims. Prevention messages and investigation approaches should be revised to incorporate awareness of such cases and their dynamics.*

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**Keywords:** *Internet; sexual abuse; offender; youth; family; acquaintance*

**T**he Internet and its related technology is transforming many domains of social life, so there is every reason to believe that it will have an effect on child maltreatment as well. Thus far, the predominant concern about the Internet and child maltreatment has involved online meeting crimes in which, stereotypically, adult strangers have used the Internet to meet and develop abusive relationships with vulnerable youth.

However, the Internet may have also affected the nature and dynamics of sexual abuse that occurs at the hands of nonstrangers including family and acquaintance sex offenders in a number of ways. First, the availability of digital photography and the market for child pornography on the Internet may have made the production and online distribution of child pornography a more frequent component of abuse by family and acquaintance offenders. Second, the availability and ease of online communications may allow some acquaintance offenders to bypass parents and other caretakers to develop abusive relationships with potential victims that they could not have achieved with face-to-face contact. Third, the Internet may provide new opportunities for family and acquaintance offenders to seduce children and adolescents for abuse, including new ways of bringing sexual topics into interactions and exposing children to sexual images and materials.

## **Family and Acquaintance Sex Offenders**

Children and adolescents are more victimized than adults (Finkelhor, 1997; Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). This is partly because of their dependency status that results in little choice as to whom they associate with. In other words, children who live in violent families or violent neighborhoods typically do not have the ability to leave these environments. Child victimization in the form of sexual abuse in particular has been an important focus of study for several

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Authors' Note: For the purposes of compliance with Section 507 of PL 104-208 (the Stevens Amendment), readers are advised that 66% of the funds for this program are derived from federal sources (Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention). The total amount of federal funding involved is \$503,117.

decades prior to the existence of the Internet. Most offenders in non-Internet, or conventional, child sexual abuse cases perpetrate their crimes against victims within their own families or with whom they are acquainted (Finkelhor, 1997). Children younger than the age of 12 are dependent on their caregivers, and, as such, most of the sexual abuse occurring in this age group is by family members. As children grow, they develop more connections with people outside of the family unit, and abuse at the hands of persons outside of the family, such as acquaintances and peers, increases.

### *Current Article*

The current article will use a sample of acquaintance and family sex offenders identified in a study of Internet sex crimes against children to explore and illustrate how such offenders used the Internet. Specifically, this article will examine offender, victim, and case characteristics from a national sample of cases involving arrests made for Internet-related sex crimes against minors. Data will first address what proportion of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors were committed by family and acquaintance offenders and compare this to the numbers of cases involving the more publicized online meeting crimes. Next, offender and victim characteristics will be examined between offender groups (i.e., family versus acquaintance offenders). Then, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative characteristics, we will explore the different ways the Internet is used by family and acquaintance offenders, the types of sexual assaults that occurred, and the aggravating features of the crimes contrasted between the two offender groups. Finally, case outcomes in terms of convictions of offenders and mental health referrals for victims will be examined across groups.

### *National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study*

The N-JOV Study was undertaken to obtain a sense of the scope and types of law enforcement activity in this area and to serve as a baseline for monitoring the growth of Internet sex crimes against minors and related law enforcement activities.

Because Internet sex crimes against minors are a recent phenomenon, data about them have not been gathered in a national study. The N-JOV Study is the first national research project to systematically collect data about the number and characteristics of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors, and it had three goals:

- to estimate a baseline number of arrests during a 1-year period so that the growth of these cases in the criminal justice system can be measured in the future,
- to provide a statistical portrait of the characteristics of Internet sex crimes against minors and a description of how they are handled within the criminal justice system, and
- to organize the variety of cases into a typology useful for tracking and analysis.

## **METHOD**

### *N-JOV Sample and Procedure*

The N-JOV study collected information from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about the characteristics of Internet sex crimes against minors and the numbers of arrests for these crimes during a 1-year period. The goals of the methodology were to construct a representative national sample of law enforcement agencies that would give an overall picture of these crimes in the United States, understand how these cases emerged and were handled in a diverse group of agencies, and obtain detailed data about the characteristics of these crimes from well-informed, reliable sources.

Law enforcement investigators were interviewed, because investigators have been in the forefront of identifying and combating these crimes and are the best sources of accessible, in-depth information about their nature. A focus was placed on cases that ended in arrests rather than crime reports or open investigations, because cases ending in arrests were more likely to involve actual crimes; had more complete information about the crimes, offenders, and victims; gave a clear standard for counting cases; and helped avoid interviewing multiple agencies about the same case.

First, a national sample of 2,574 state, county, and local law enforcement agencies was surveyed by mail asking them if they had made arrests in Internet-related child pornography or sexual exploitation cases. Detailed telephone interviews were then conducted with investigators who had such cases. The methodology was modeled after that used in the Second National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMA-2) to survey law enforcement agencies about child abduction cases (Sedlak, Finkelhor, Hammer, & Schultz, 2002).

Eighty-eight percent of the agencies ( $n = 2,270$ ) responded to the mail surveys. Seventeen percent of the agencies ( $n = 383$ ) that responded reported 1,723 arrests. To be eligible, cases had to (a) have victims younger than 18; (b) involve arrests between July 1, 2000, and June 30, 2001; and (c) be Internet related.

Cases were Internet related if any of the following criteria were met: (a) An offender-victim relationship was initiated online; (b) an offender who was a family member or acquaintance of a victim used the Internet to communicate with a victim to further a sexual victimization or otherwise exploit the victim; (c) a case involved an Internet-related, proactive investigation; (d) child pornography was received or distributed online or arrangements for receiving or distributing were made online; or (e) child pornography was found on a computer, on removable media such as floppy disks and compact disks, as computer print-outs, or in a digital format.

We designed a sampling procedure for case-specific interviews that took into account the number of cases reported by an agency so that we would not unduly burden respondents in agencies with many cases. If an agency reported between 1 and 3 Internet-related cases, we conducted follow-up interviews for every case. Eighty-five percent of the responding agencies were in this group. For agencies that reported more than 3 cases, we conducted interviews for all cases that involved identified victims and sampled other cases. (The term *identified victims* denotes victims that were identified and contacted by law enforcement in the course of the investigation.) For agencies with between 4 and 15 cases, approximately half of the cases that did not have identified victims were randomly selected for follow-up interviews. In agencies that reported more than 15 cases, approximately one quarter of the cases with no identified victims were randomly selected. In some agencies, we could not find out which cases had identified victims, so we sampled from all cases, using the sampling procedure described above.

Of the 1,723 cases reported by law enforcement, 37% ( $n = 646$ ) were not selected for the sample and 16% ( $n = 281$ ) were ineligible thus resulting in 796 cases in the sample. Ineligible sampled cases were not replaced in the sample, because one study goal was to estimate annual numbers of arrests for which we used statistical weighting procedures that required non-replacement. Of these 796 cases, 79% ( $n = 630$ ) of the telephone interviews were completed by six trained interviewers between October 2001 and July 2002. Of those not completed, 13% involved investigators that did not respond to requests for interviews, 3% involved respondents who refused to be interviewed, and 5% involved duplicate cases or cases that could not be identified. A total of 18 completed interviews were duplicate cases and thus dropped from the data set thereby resulting in 612 completed interviews. The present article examined a subsample of 126 arrests in which offenders had prior relationships

with their victims, either as a family member or an acquaintance.

### *Weighting Procedures and Prevalence Estimates*

A statistical technique called *weighting* was used to estimate annual numbers of arrests involving Internet sex crimes against minors in a 1-year time frame within the United States. Weighting takes into account sampling procedures and nonresponse to allow use of the data to project estimated annual arrest totals with 95% confidence that the accurate number will fall within a specific range. Four weights were constructed to reflect the complex sample design. First, each case was given a sampling weight to account for the probability of selection to both the mail survey and telephone interview samples. The sampling weights were adjusted for agency nonresponse, case-level nonresponse, duplication of cases among agencies, and arrests by one federal agency that did not participate in case-level interviews. Second, primary sampling unit weights were created to account for clustering within each of the three sampling frames. Third, stratification weights were computed based on the different sampling strategies for each frame. Finally, finite population correction factors accounted for the sampling being conducted without replacing ineligible cases. (More detailed information about these weighting procedures is available at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/N-JOVmeth.pdf>.)

### *Measures and Definitions*

Cases involving family and acquaintance offenders arrested for Internet-related sex crimes against minors were defined as those in which the offenders were known to their victims as family members or face-to-face acquaintances prior to the crimes they committed (i.e., they did not first meet online) and who used the Internet in some capacity during their crime.

The victims described in this article were primary victims. In more than half of the cases (54%), they were the only victims involved in current crimes. Twenty-five percent of the crimes had 2 victims, 14% had 3 to 5 victims, and 6% had 6 or more victims. In cases with multiple victims, the primary victim was chosen for follow-up based on the following hierarchical criteria: (a) the victim who used the Internet directly, (b) the victim who was the most seriously victimized, or (c) the victim who was the youngest.

Other variables used throughout this article were part of a survey developed for this study. Questions were developed through interviews and consultations with law enforcement. Completed surveys were also

pilot tested with police before the actual data collection began. These questions covered a number of different aspects of the case including how the case was initiated, specific case characteristics, offender characteristics, victim characteristics, and case outcomes.

## RESULTS

### Number of Arrests

An estimated 460 arrests (95% confidence interval: 435-485) were made in the United States for Internet-related sex crimes against minors involving family and acquaintance offenders in the 1-year period beginning July 1, 2000. This represents 18% of all arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors, which constituted approximately 2,577 arrests in the same time frame (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). Arrests of family and acquaintance offenders represented approximately half of all Internet crimes against identified victims (39% of all arrests) with the other half representing offenders who used the Internet to initiate a relationship with the victim (i.e., Internet-initiated). Other Internet-related sex crimes against minors identified in this study included Internet solicitations to undercover law enforcement posing online as minors (25% of arrests) and Internet child pornography possession or distribution (36% of arrests; see Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004, for more details on these other Internet-related sex crimes against minors).

### Offender and Victim Characteristics Across Offender Groups

*Offender demographics.* All but 1% of offenders were male (see Table 1). Most offenders were 26 years of age or older (87%), and most were non-Hispanic Whites (95%). Fifty-one percent had annual household incomes between \$20,000 and \$50,000 with 19% having incomes greater than \$50,000. There was a range of highest education levels with 36% being high school graduates and 35% having at least some college experience. Twenty-four percent lived in suburban neighborhoods, and an additional 46% lived in small towns or rural areas. Thirty-three percent were single and never married, 35% were married, and 17% divorced. More than three quarters of offenders worked full-time (78%) with 9% unemployed.

Some differences existed between family and acquaintance offenders on the above demographic characteristics. More family offenders were from small towns, whereas a greater proportion of acquaintances lived in urban locations. More acquaintance offenders had jobs that provided them with access to

**TABLE 1: Offender Demographic Characteristics (Unweighted N = 126)**

Demographic Characteristics	All Offenders (Unweighted N = 126)	Family Offenders (Unweighted n = 52)	Acquaintance Offenders (Unweighted n = 74)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	99 (123)	97 (49)	100 (74)
Female	1 (3)	3 (3)	0 (0)
<b>Age</b>			
Younger than 18 years old	5 (6)	0 (0)	9 (6)
18 to 25 years old	8 (8)	6 (2)	9 (6)
26 to 39 years old	43 (61)	48 (29)	39 (32)
40 years or older	44 (51)	46 (21)	43 (30)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
Non-Hispanic White	95 (115)	97 (49)	93 (66)
Hispanic White	3 (7)	2 (2)	4 (5)
Non-Hispanic African American	1 (3)	1 (1)	2 (2)
Asian	1 (1)	0 (0)	1 (1)
<b>Geographical location*</b>			
Small town	35 (34)	45 (19)	27 (15)
Suburban	24 (31)	19 (12)	27 (19)
Urban	21 (31)	13 (8)	27 (23)
Rural	11 (14)	13 (7)	10 (7)
Large town	10 (16)	11 (6)	9 (10)
<b>Highest education<sup>a</sup></b>			
Did not finish high school	9 (14)	4 (4)	12 (10)
High school graduate	36 (38)	45 (18)	29 (20)
Some college education	18 (28)	20 (12)	17 (16)
College graduate	12 (19)	6 (5)	17 (14)
Postcollege degree	5 (6)	0 (0)	10 (6)
Technical training	6 (5)	9 (3)	4 (2)
Don't know	14 (16)	17 (10)	12 (6)
<b>Employment</b>			
Full-time	78 (97)	72 (39)	83 (58)
Unemployed	9 (11)	13 (6)	5 (5)
In school	5 (7)	0 (0)	10 (7)
Part-time	6 (10)	6 (2)	6 (8)
Retired	5 (3)	11 (3)	0 (0)
Other (e.g., disabled, trust fund)	4 (6)	5 (2)	4 (4)
Don't know	1 (3)	3 (3)	0 (0)
Job provided access to children**	15 (22)	5 (3)	23 (19)
<b>Household annual income<sup>a</sup></b>			
Less than \$20,000	17 (27)	15 (11)	18 (16)
\$20,000 to \$50,000	51 (58)	57 (23)	46 (35)
\$50,000 to \$80,000	14 (20)	13 (9)	15 (11)
More than \$80,000	5 (6)	1 (1)	8 (5)
Don't know	13 (15)	14 (8)	12 (7)
<b>Marital status***</b>			
Single, never married	33 (44)	12 (6)	50 (38)
Married	35 (43)	58 (30)	18 (13)
Divorced	17 (22)	10 (7)	22 (15)
Living with a partner	6 (9)	8 (4)	5 (5)
Separated	3 (4)	6 (2)	2 (2)
Widowed	3 (3)	7 (3)	0 (0)
Don't know	2 (1)	0 (0)	4 (1)

NOTE: ns and percentages may not be proportional because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities, and some cases have more influence than others. Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

a. Missing data represent more than 5%. A comparison dummy variable was examined and found to be nonsignificant.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2: Victim Demographic Characteristics (Unweighted N = 126)**

Victim Characteristics	All Victims (Unweighted N = 126)	Family Victims (Unweighted n = 52)	Acquaintance Victims (Unweighted n = 74)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
<b>Relationship to offender</b>			
Family member	44 (52)	100 (52)	
Adult relative (grand- parent, uncle, aunt)	18 (14)	40 (14)	
Parent	9 (16)	21 (16)	
Stepparent	8 (11)	19 (11)	
Parent's intimate partner	8 (9)	18 (9)	
Juvenile relative	< 1 (1)	1 (1)	
Legal guardian	< 1 (1)	1 (1)	
Acquaintance	56 (74)		100 (74)
Neighbor or member of community	16 (17)		29 (17)
Friend or relative of juvenile friend	12 (11)		21 (11)
Teacher	9 (10)		16 (10)
Family friend or friend of parent	7 (10)		13 (10)
Leader or member of youth organization/ athletics	4 (7)		7 (7)
Employer or co- worker of victim	2 (4)		4 (4)
Other youth known to victim	2 (4)		4 (4)
Boarder	1 (3)		2 (3)
Babysitter	1 (3)		2 (3)
Other	2 (5)		2 (5)
<b>Demographics</b>			
<b>Gender***</b>			
Female	70 (85)	93 (47)	51 (38)
Male	30 (41)	7 (5)	49 (36)
<b>Age***</b>			
3 years old or younger	2 (6)	4 (5)	1 (1)
3 to 5 years old	5 (9)	8 (6)	2 (3)
6 to 12 years old	45 (56)	70 (31)	25 (25)
13 to 17 years old	48 (55)	18 (10)	71 (45)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
Non-Hispanic White	95 (116)	99 (51)	91 (65)
Hispanic White	3 (5)	0 (0)	5 (5)
Non-Hispanic African American	1 (2)	0 (0)	2 (2)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (1)	0 (0)	1 (1)
Asian	< 1 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Not ascertainable	1 (1)	0 (0)	1 (1)
<b>Geographical location</b>			
Small town	38 (33)	44 (18)	33 (15)
Suburban	20 (27)	18 (11)	21 (16)
Urban	19 (31)	16 (8)	21 (23)
Rural	11 (13)	9 (7)	12 (6)
Large town	10 (16)	11 (6)	9 (10)
Don't know/not ascertainable	3 (6)	1 (2)	4 (4)
<b>Household annual income***<sup>a</sup></b>			
Less than \$20,000	23 (27)	24 (12)	22 (15)
\$20,000 to \$50,000	42 (49)	52 (22)	34 (27)
\$50,000 to \$80,000	11 (17)	12 (7)	10 (10)
More than \$80,000	7 (9)	1 (1)	12 (8)

(continued)

**TABLE 2 (continued)**

Victim Characteristics	All Victims (Unweighted N = 126)	Family Victims (Unweighted n = 52)	Acquaintance Victims (Unweighted n = 74)
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
Don't know/not ascertainable	18 (24)	11 (10)	23 (14)
<b>Who was victim living with*</b>			
Both biological parents	35 (48)	32 (16)	38 (32)
One biological parent only	39 (46)	35 (19)	42 (27)
One biological parent and a stepparent	19 (20)	30 (14)	11 (6)
Foster parent or other	5 (9)	2 (2)	7 (7)
Don't know/not ascertainable	1 (3)	1 (1)	2 (2)

NOTE: ns and percentages may not be proportional because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities, and some cases have more influence than others. Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

a. Because missing data were greater than 5%, a dichotomous dummy variable was created to test missing versus other responses and found to be significant. As such, this variable includes the missing data in the comparisons.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

children (23% vs. 5%). In terms of marital status, family offenders were more likely to be married (58% vs. 18%), whereas acquaintance offenders were more likely to be single and never married (50% vs. 12%) or divorced (22% vs. 10%).

*Victim relationship with the offender.* Of the family and acquaintance offenders, 44% were family members that encompassed a variety of relationships such as adult relatives (e.g., grandparent, aunt, or uncle), parents, stepparents, and parent's intimate partners (Table 2). Offenders who were acquaintances of victims constituted 56% of cases and consisted of neighbors, relatives of juvenile friends, teachers, family friends, and leaders or members of youth organizations, among others.

*Victim demographics.* The majority of victims were female (70%), 45% of all victims were between the ages of 6 and 12, and 48% were 13 to 17 years old (Table 2). Most victims were non-Hispanic Whites and lived in a variety of geographical areas (e.g., small towns, urban, suburban). The majority (65%) lived in households with annual incomes of \$50,000 or less. Thirty-five percent lived with both biological parents, 39% with one biological parent only, and 19% lived with a biological parent and a stepparent.

The most notable differences between the victims of family offenders and those of acquaintance offenders were gender and age. Almost all of the victims of

**TABLE 3: Usage of the Internet in Family and Acquaintance Sexual Abuse Cases (Unweighted N = 126)**

<i>Use of Internet<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Cases Cases (Unweighted N = 126) % (n)</i>	<i>Family Cases (Unweighted n = 52) % (n)</i>	<i>Acquaintance Cases (Unweighted n = 74) % (n)</i>
Seduce or groom	Sexual conversations online and sending sexual pictures; fondling or holding child on lap while viewing pornography, illustrating how to perform sexual acts	67 (75)	70 (29)	65 (46)
Child pornography productions	Using Internet as a tool to distribute child pornography	43 (64)	49 (34)	39 (30)
Arrange meetings or other communication***	Set up time and locations for meetings	26 (31)	6 (2)	43 (29)
Reward*	Attracting victims to home with promises of Internet use	4 (5)	0 (0)	8 (5)
Advertise or sell	Advertising victims for prostitution, offering minors to other offenders	2 (6)	2 (3)	2 (3)

NOTE: *ns* and percentages may not be proportional because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities, and some cases have more influence than others. Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

a. Overlap between different uses of the Internet possible.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

family offenders were female (93%) and younger than the age of 12 (82%), whereas nearly half (49%) of the victims of acquaintance offenders were male and most were teenagers (71%). Also, victims of acquaintance offenders were more likely to live in households with slightly higher annual incomes, although there were significantly more missing data for victims of acquaintance offenders that might account for this difference. Victims of family offenders were more likely to live with stepparents (30% vs. 11%).

### *Use of the Internet*

Through examining both qualitative narrative descriptions and quantitative data, we identified five primary ways the Internet was used in the commission of these crimes: (a) seduction or grooming, (b) child pornography production, (c) arranging meetings and other communication, (d) rewarding victims, and (e) advertising or selling victims (Table 3). Most offenders (61%) used the Internet in only a single one of these ways, but 30% used two and 9% used three ways.

*Seduction or grooming.* The most common way the Internet was used by family and acquaintance offenders was to seduce or groom victims through online sexual conversations, sending sexual pictures to victims, fondling or holding victims while jointly viewing child or adult pornography, and using online pornography to show victims how to perform sexual acts. Most family and acquaintance offenders (67% overall; 65% of all acquaintance offenders and 70% of all family offenders) used the Internet to seduce or

groom. For example, a high school teacher gradually introduced sexual conversations to a 14-year-old female student online. He wanted to have sex with her and showed her soft-core photos he had taken of other girls at the school. The victim's older sister insisted she report this to the police. In another case, a 43-year-old offender was fondling his 5-year-old neighbor while showing her pornography on the computer.

*Child pornography production.* The Internet was used by almost half of the offenders (43% overall; 49% of all family offenders and 39% of all acquaintance offenders) to store or disseminate produced child pornography images to other offenders online. For example, a 27-year-old offender was putting sexual pictures of his 9-year-old half-sister on his computer. He had been taking photos of her while she was in the bathroom, in the shower, and while changing through use of a hidden camera and by going into the bathroom himself to take pictures. These images were stored on his computer. He tried to force a towel from her when she was covering herself with it. She told her mother who called the police. In another case, a 39-year-old offender sexually abused his daughter from the time she was 7 until she was 10. He sometimes took pornographic pictures of the abuse and e-mailed them to other people.

*Arranging meetings and other communication.* Another way the Internet was used was as a tool to arrange meeting times and communicate with victims. Twenty-six percent of offenders used the Internet this way (6% of all family offenders and 43% of all

acquaintance offenders;  $p < .001$ ). For example, a teacher used the Internet to communicate with a 15-year-old student by using code words to arrange meetings. Their sexual encounters occurred after school and on weekends until the victim's parents found the e-mails and reported him to the police. In another case, the offender was a high school teacher. This offender and his female student started talking online. The victim became uncomfortable when the conversations became more sexual. He solicited her for sex and kept asking for nude pictures, but she refused. In the school, he would do things like grab her buttocks and make it look like an accident.

*Rewarding victims.* The Internet was also used as a reward to attract victims into the offender's home in 4% of all cases. These were all acquaintance offenders (8%). For example, 1 case involved 3 brothers who met the offender through their mother. The offender's hook was to teach the victims how to use the computer. On weekends, he would take the boys and his computer from his home to a beach cottage where he would show them child and adult pornography and sexually assault them. In another case, the offender had about 12 computers in his home, and he allowed kids to have their own computer and view adult pornography. He was also producing child pornography with 7 of these victims.

*Advertising or selling victims.* In a minority of cases (2% overall; 2% of family offenders and 2% of acquaintance offenders), offenders used the Internet to advertise victims in prostitution cases or sell minors to other offenders. For example, a 38-year-old offender posted an ad on the Internet for an escort service involving young girls. The victims were 5- and 9-year-old girls who were the daughters of the offender's girlfriend. Undercover agents contacted the offender, and he, in turn, sent them images of the girls that were sexual in nature. As another example, a 30-year-old man was selling sex with a 12-year-old boy online. This offender also took pornographic pictures and sexually molested this boy. An investigator went undercover online as an adult who wanted access to the minor. In another case, an investigator identified an online sex ring involving 6 offenders involved in exploiting at least 3 victims through a prostitution ring that was advertising underage girls online. One of these offenders, a 24-year-old man, was advertising a 13-year-old girl.

### ***Types of Sexual Assault Crimes***

Some form of sexual activity occurred in all cases. The sexual activity commonly involved intercourse or some other penetration (45%), noncontact victim-

ization such as child pornography production or transmitting pornography online to a victim (21%), fondling (15%), oral sex (8%), inappropriate touching (7%), or something else such as solicitation, attempted penetration, or having the victim touch the offender sexually (2%). The lengths of time the crimes continued before becoming known to police varied with no differences between the two types of offenders. For 23% of the cases, the crime continued for 1 month or less; for 19%, it went on for 1 to 6 months; for 23%, it went on for 6 months to 1 year; and for 24%, it went on for more than 1 year.

### ***Other Aggravating Features of Sexual Assault***

Police reported on a number of aggravating aspects of these sexual assaults (Table 4). Specifically, police said coercion was involved in almost half of the cases (45%) with more coercion by the family offenders (63% vs. 30%). They reported that some of the sexual activity was voluntary on the part of victim (37% of cases) but was more likely with victims of acquaintance offenders (55% vs. 15%). Also, a small percentage of offenders (11%) used violence or threats of violence to sexually assault victims, more often by family offenders (22% vs. 1%). Victims were offered or given illegal drugs or alcohol in 28% of these crimes, and in a smaller number of cases, victims were abducted (4%), illegally detained (5%), physically assaulted (6%), or physically injured (3%). Seven percent of victims committed crimes when they were with offenders. Child pornography production was involved in 54% of these crimes. Although adult pornography was offered or given to victims in half of these cases, this happened more often among family offenders (57% vs. 46%).

### ***Case Outcomes for Offenders and Victims***

*Convictions.* The majority of both family and acquaintance offenders pled guilty (71%) or were convicted at trial (15%) for the crimes they were charged with (Table 5). Family offenders were more likely to plead guilty (82% vs. 63%), whereas acquaintance offenders were more likely to be convicted at trial (22% vs. 7%). Only a small percentage of cases involved dropped or dismissed charges (2%). Some cases were still pending (11%) at the time of data collection. More than half of the offenders received some incarceration for their crimes (60%). More than one third (33%) received some probation. Almost all offenders were required to register as sex offenders (92%), but this was the case for significantly more family offenders (97% vs. 88%).

**TABLE 4: Illegal Sexual Activity and Aggravating Features of Assault (Unweighted N = 126)**

Characteristics	All Victims (Unweighted N = 126)	Family Victims (Unweighted n = 52)	Acquaintance Victims (Unweighted n = 74)
Illegal sexual activity			
Type			
Intercourse or other penetration	45 (50)	52 (24)	40 (26)
Noncontact	22 (31)	17 (11)	25 (20)
Fondling	15 (18)	17 (6)	14 (12)
Oral sex	8 (12)	3 (3)	13 (9)
Inappropriate touching	7 (8)	9 (5)	6 (3)
Something else	2 (5)	4 (3)	1 (2)
Don't know	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Length of time crime continued before it became known to police <sup>a</sup>			
1 month or less	23 (24)	19 (6)	27 (18)
1 month to 6 months	19 (21)	15 (7)	23 (14)
6 months to 1 year	23 (28)	29 (12)	17 (16)
More than 1 year	24 (39)	28 (19)	21 (20)
Don't know/not ascertainable	10 (14)	8 (8)	12 (6)
Aggravating features			
Child pornography production	54 (79)	61 (38)	49 (41)
Coercion <sup>***a</sup>	45 (51)	63 (28)	30 (23)
Voluntary <sup>***b</sup>	37 (42)	15 (8)	55 (34)
Use of violence or threats of violence <sup>***a</sup>	11 (11)	22 (9)	1 (2)
Offered or given illegal drugs or alcohol <sup>a</sup>	28 (34)	21 (9)	34 (25)
Abducted	4 (4)	7 (3)	1 (1)
Illegally detained	5 (6)	5 (1)	5 (5)
Physically assaulted	6 (14)	8 (7)	5 (7)
Physically injured	3 (6)	5 (4)	1 (2)
Victim committed crime when with offender	7 (7)	1 (2)	11 (5)
Offered or given adult pornography <sup>*a</sup>	50 (62)	57 (27)	46 (35)

NOTE: *ns* and percentages may not be proportional because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities, and some cases have more influence than others. Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

a. Missing data represent more than 5%. A comparison dummy variable was examined and found to be nonsignificant.

b. Because missing data were greater than 5%, a dichotomous dummy variable was created to test missing versus other responses and found to be significant. This variable includes the missing data in the comparisons.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Mental health referrals.* Most of the victims in this study were referred to some type of mental health service (79%), although whether these services were utilized was not addressed in this study. Nearly one quarter (24%) of youth were referred to a child advocacy center, 15% to a victim advocate or victim service agency, and 15% to a sexual assault agency. Other re-

**TABLE 5: Offender and Victim Case Outcomes (Unweighted N = 126)**

Case Outcomes	All Victims (Unweighted % (n))	Family Victims (Unweighted % (n))	Acquaintance Victims (Unweighted % (n))
Offenders			
Guilty plea <sup>***</sup>	71 (84)	82 (37)	63 (47)
Convicted at trial <sup>**</sup>	15 (20)	7 (6)	22 (14)
Charges dropped or dismissed	2 (4)	1 (1)	3 (3)
Offender dead or missing	0 (0)	3 (2)	0 (0)
Case pending	11 (16)	8 (6)	13 (10)
Any incarceration	60 (79)	69 (36)	53 (43)
Any probation	33 (38)	30 (16)	36 (22)
Required to register as a sex offender <sup>***</sup>	92 (98)	97 (46)	88 (52)
Victims			
Any mental health referral	79 (103)	87 (44)	74 (59)
Victim advocate or victim service agency	15 (23)	21 (10)	11 (13)
Child advocacy center	24 (27)	25 (13)	23 (14)
Sexual assault support agency	15 (12)	10 (2)	18 (10)
Mental health agency	10 (10)	12 (4)	9 (6)
Child protective service agency	9 (15)	9 (9)	8 (6)
Other (medical, private services)	6 (11)	1 (1)	10 (10)

NOTE: *ns* and percentages may not be proportional because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities, and some cases have more influence than others. Some percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

ferrals included mental health agencies, child protective services, and medical services.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the media emphasis on Internet sex crimes against minors involving online meetings, the findings of this study reveal that some sex offenders use the Internet to exploit and abuse children who are family members or face-to-face acquaintances. Internet-related crimes committed by family and acquaintance offenders comprised almost one fifth of all arrests made for Internet sex crimes against minors in a 1-year time period. Yet these arrests still constitute a relatively small portion of arrests involving all sex crimes against minors. This is indicated by the author's estimate of 89,000 cases of sexual abuse substantiated by child protection agencies or an extrapolated estimate of 65,000 arrests in the year 2000 for all types of sex crimes against minors based on National Incidence Based Reporting System data (Wolak et al., 2003). Another important fact to remember when try-



ing to place these crimes into perspective is that most sex crimes against minors are never reported, and many crimes that are reported often do not end in arrests. Our findings apply only to cases ending in arrests, and we do not attempt to characterize or count the cases that do not end in arrest.

Another important point to consider is that given the current stereotype that Internet crimes involve online meetings, the possibility that family and acquaintance sex offenders used the Internet may not have been considered during investigations of conventional child sexual abuse cases. The Internet may be used in these crimes more often than we know. If law enforcement investigators routinely ask youth about all the ways the offender talked with them and about everything the offender showed them (including through the Internet), they may find evidence like e-mail correspondence and pictures that could strengthen cases and result in additional charges for crimes such as child pornography production. In turn, this evidence could lead to more successful prosecutions in cases involving family and acquaintance offenders given that corroborative evidence in the form of physical trauma and witnesses is rare in child sexual abuse cases (Brewer & Rowe, 1997; Furniss, 1992).

### *Offender and Victim Demographics*

Some interesting findings were observed regarding the demographics of victims and offenders. Similar to conventional child sexual abuse cases, the relationships between the victim and offender changed with the children's age (Finkelhor, 1997). Specifically, abuse by a family member was more common with younger children, whereas adolescents were more likely to be abused by acquaintances. This is due, in part, to the dependent nature of young children on their caretakers and the greater time away from the family that occurs during adolescence. Likewise, conventional sexual abuse is more likely to occur in households with stepfathers, and victims are more typically females (Finkelhor, 1986)—findings that were replicated in the current article.

The current article also found that nearly half of the victims of acquaintance offenders were boys. This is a larger percentage than those associated with conventional sexual abuse cases in which the gender of victims of acquaintance offenders are about 23% boys (Finkelhor, 1984). In general, the research on boy victims of child sexual abuse is ambiguous and thought to be underreported due to expectations of masculinity, public stereotypes of girls as victims, and the social stigma attached to homosexuality. This raises some

interesting questions concerning the role of the Internet in the sexual abuse of children.

One question that needs to be explored is whether higher percentages of boys actually are victimized in Internet-related cases, and, if so, why? One explanation of this finding is the possibility that some of these boys may have been gay or bisexual. The Internet offers a vast amount of information and support that allows for the exploration and development of sexual identity through more private avenues. This may open up the possibility for exploitation by those professing an interest in helping these youth. But this finding of more boy victims in Internet-related cases may also be explained not by the sexual identity of boys but by their interest in pornographic material and its widespread availability on the Internet (Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004). This is further supported by data from the current study indicating boys were significantly more likely than girls to have exposure to both adult (63% vs. 29% of girls) and child pornography (58% vs. 33% of girls) during the crime. Offenders may have more success in initiating boys into sexual conversations and behavior through use of this material. This, combined with the relative anonymity and ease of access to pornography and sexual chat rooms, may play a role in these findings.

### *The Role of the Internet in Family and Acquaintance Sexual Abuse*

There are several features of the Internet that may facilitate sex crimes by family and acquaintance offenders. Three specific features are access, affordability, and anonymity (Cooper, 1997). Access refers to the increasingly large numbers of people around the world who can conveniently access the Internet from such locations as their home, school, work, and libraries. This access allows for communication among people of all ages and may have increased the pool of victims for some sex offenders. The Internet and its associated technology have also become very affordable (Cooper, 1997) thereby allowing for a more diverse population of users. A certain level of anonymity also exists online that may allow for exploration of sexual interests and affect sexual expression. The Internet allows for private conversation with minors and private access to pornographic material that is often used in these crimes. These and certainly other features most likely laid the foundation for the use of the Internet in the current cases.

Offenders used the Internet in a variety of ways in these cases with the most common being to seduce or groom victims (both online and offline), store or disseminate sexual images of victims, and arrange meetings or otherwise communicate with victims. The

Internet was used to seduce or groom in a number of ways including through online communications that involved sexual conversations and requests online and sending sexual images to victims through e-mail. These findings parallel conventional child sex offenders who are said to often operate through seduction or grooming (Lanning, 2001). Seduction or grooming involves providing children with attention, affection, kindness, gifts, and money until their inhibitions are lowered. Once inhibitions are lowered, victims are likely to cooperate or consent to the sexual activity. The nature of the seduction varies based on the developmental age, needs, and vulnerabilities of the child. Those offenders who prefer younger children will often make sex a part of a game or horseplay, whereas those who prefer adolescents will often rely on techniques involving ease of sexual arousal, rebelliousness, and curiosity to manipulate the adolescent into having sex. These techniques may be easier with the Internet and the ability it allows for private conversations that would be more difficult to broach in person. Offenders also used the Internet as a grooming tool by showing victims adult and child pornography while fondling a child in their lap or as a way to visually show the victim the sexual act he wanted them to take part in. In this sense, the Internet appears to be more a tool of convenience with quick access to millions of sexual images of a wide variety of types.

The production of child pornography played a large role in these crimes, occurring in more than half of these cases. For some offenders, the computer may have been a convenient location to store digital images, much like a photo album but with a much larger storing capacity. Another benefit of this digital technology is that it allows producers access to images without the risk of having them developed at a commercial facility where their actions could be detected and reported to police. Other benefits or issues that may arise in cases involving child pornography production is their potential to aid in the identification of child sexual abuse victims, and they may also increase the ability of law enforcement and prosecutors to apprehend and convict these offenders due to better evidence in the forms of these images. The presence of these sexual images could also further the abuse and negative impact of the experience for the victim in terms of their mental well-being—a possibility that mental health professionals could address during treatment.

This study did find that some family and acquaintance offenders were posting images on their computers and disseminating their produced images online to other offenders—a behavior that is important to acknowledge and address for criminal justice and

mental health professionals working with sex offenders. Prior to the Internet, the possession, dissemination, and production of child pornography was largely an underground phenomenon (Jenkins, 2001; Taylor & Quayle, 2003). With the Internet, offenders can communicate, trade, sell, or otherwise disseminate sexual images of children. This ability to communicate and exchange images allows them to rationalize and encourage their behavior among each other. Some offenders, primarily those who were acquaintances of their victims, used the Internet to arrange meetings or otherwise communicate with their victims. These other forms of communication generally involved seduction or grooming through sexual conversations or the sending of sexual images discussed above. It is unclear whether the sexual assault in these cases would have occurred without the presence of the Internet, but it certainly could aid the process thereby potentially accelerating its progression.

Although some offenders used the Internet to reward or draw minors into their homes, this use was not common, nor was advertising or selling minors to other offenders online. It is possible that these may be aspects of the Internet that are not being picked up by police in their investigations, or it may be that most offenders are not utilizing the Internet in these ways. Use of the Internet for these behaviors should be investigated in future studies in this area.

#### *Case Outcomes*

The outcomes of these cases were successful with most offenders pleading guilty or convicted at trial. Interestingly, more family offenders pled guilty whereas more acquaintance offenders were convicted at trial. Higher rates of guilty pleas for family members may be due to the complex nature of the relationships with their victims, the younger age of the victims, and the possibility of better evidence. Furthermore, there were very low rates of dismissed or dropped cases. Many offenders received some incarceration, and most were required to register as a sex offender. These findings all speak to the idea that the criminal justice system is taking these crimes seriously and successfully prosecuting these criminals.

#### *Implications for Prevention and Law Enforcement Investigations*

The findings of this article suggest a number of implications for prevention and law enforcement investigations. First, the notion of Internet victimization needs to be expanded to include situations where offenders are family members and acquaintances. The number of arrests involving these offenders was

nearly the same as the number of arrests for online meeting crimes in the same time frame (Wolak et al., 2003). Although victims who meet offenders online are an important population to focus on for prevention, it is equally important to address prevention messages toward situations involving sex crimes with family and acquaintance offenders. These children and adolescents typically have relationships with their offenders based on trust or power differentials, and they may be ensnared by offenders and do not know where to turn for help. Prevention should focus on letting children and adolescents know that adult family members and acquaintances who use the Internet to engage them in sexual conversations or send them sexual material are committing crimes and should be reported to a trusted adult, the police, or the CyberTipline at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com). They should also be made aware of the potential benefits of the Internet as a means of seeking support and reporting these crimes.

Second, law enforcement should be encouraged to investigate the possibility of all means of communication between the victim and offender in the context of all child sexual abuse cases including through the Internet. Identifying an Internet component may result in better evidence in the forms of chat conversations or sexual images. This, in turn, could lead to better prosecution of these offenders given that corroborative evidence in the form of physical trauma and witnesses is rare in child sexual abuse cases (Brewer & Rowe, 1997; Furniss, 1992).

Third, mental health professionals should be asking about Internet involvement when working with victims and offenders involved in child sexual abuse cases. Gathering information about this may help professionals establish how the sexual assault was initiated and better understand any aggravating features of the crime that may be hindering recovery, such as knowledge of sexual pictures being taken and potentially disseminated online. A complete understanding of Internet involvement, if any, could aid in the development of more effective treatment and future prevention strategies for their clients.

Fourth, the data suggest the need for different prevention and intervention messages for youth of different ages. Some of the most notable differences between the two types of cases examined in this article—those with family offenders and those with acquaintance offenders—were the gender and age of the victims involved. Family offenders were more likely to have female victims younger than the age of 12, whereas acquaintance offenders were more likely to have male victims in their teens.

### *Limitations*

Although this study has a number of strengths, a few limitations must be noted. First, because most sex crimes against minors are never reported to the police (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999) and many of those known to law enforcement do not culminate in arrest (Finkelhor, Cross, & Cantor, in press), this sample cannot be said to represent the characteristics of all Internet-related victimizations that occurred during this period but only those that ended in the arrest of an offender.

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

Third, these numbers are estimates based on the sample of cases that were the subject of the interviews. Although the study was designed to yield a nationally representative sample of cases involving Internet-related sex crimes against minors, sometimes samples can be randomly skewed. The margin of error could be larger than calculated.

Fourth, the information in this study was gathered from law enforcement investigators, so the information about victims is based on their impression at the time of the crime. Gathering information from mental health and victim services professionals or victims themselves would provide much more insight into this victim population in terms of their mental well-being and both the short- and long-term impact of involvement in these crimes. Fifth, some of the unweighted cell sizes are small because of the low endorsement of certain behaviors in the commission of these crimes (e.g., abduction). As such, instability of some estimates is possible.

### *Conclusion*

The findings of this article suggest a need to expand the notion of Internet victimization to include situations where offenders are family members and acquaintances. Although the Internet may only be involved in a small proportion of sexual abuse cases, law enforcement and mental health professionals should be asking about Internet involvement when working with victims and offenders. This may allow for better evidence in the form of sexual images and

chat room conversations and the development of more effective intervention strategies. Prevention messages and investigation approaches should be revised to incorporate awareness of such cases and their dynamics.

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