



The Internet has become an important part of the lives of many people, especially children and adolescents. The number of U.S. children (five to twelve years old) and teenagers (thirteen to eighteen years old) who go online is estimated to have reached 8.6 million and 8.4 million, respectively, in 1998. Children and adolescents are the two largest groups of Internet users, with an estimated 155 percent increase in child users and a 97 percent increase in teen users by the year 2002. With an increasingly large amount of youth online, concern has developed about potentially harmful and dangerous experiences they could encounter. This concern has been fueled by media attention to stories of youth preyed upon by adults or coming across sexual material while using the Internet. There are a number of different concerns regarding youth and the Internet, such as privacy issues, overuse, exposure to violent material, and commercial fraud. Two that have received the greatest amounts of attention are sexual solicitation and exposure to sexual material. Little is known about the true extent of these problems, but some research groups are providing a first look into the frequency, impact, and characteristics of these Internet experiences on youth.

SEXUAL SOLICITATION

One of the largest concerns is the use of the Internet to involve youth in coercive, illegal, or inappropriate sexual relationships. These solicitations can be thought of in two different ways. Solicitations can take place exclusively on the Internet, meaning that they do not involve face-to-face encounters or even leaving one's computer. An example would include a youth being asked to engage in "cybersex," which is a form of interactive sexual conversation, through chat rooms or instant messages. (Instant messages are programs that allow users to hold written conversations through the computer in real time.) Second, online solicitations can develop a real-world component, where adults meet youth on the Internet and draw them into a meeting where they can be sexually exploited or assaulted. Much of the discussion surrounding this topic portrays the stereotypical picture of an adult, male stranger preying on young children. Yet the characteristics of these experiences on the Internet may be more diverse than this image reveals. As is the case with conventional sexual abuse, online solicitations may not always be premeditated, deceptive, or made by an adult male who is unknown to the youth.

A unique element of the Internet—the anonymity it provides to its users—further complicates matters. While using the Internet, people can easily alter their

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identities; for example, adults can pretend to be youth and vice versa. One poll of teenagers (thirteen to seventeen years old) suggests that assuming the role of someone else could be a fairly common practice; 72 percent of girls and 57 percent of boys reporting having encountered someone they suspected of altering their identity while online. Most of these incidents are likely to be innocent, but the danger develops when an adult takes on the persona of a child for the purpose of developing a trust with that child.

Frequency and Impact

Findings from the Youth Internet Safety Survey, funded by the U.S. Congress through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, suggest that online sexual solicitation of youth is common, with 19 percent of youth (ten- to seventeen-year-old regular Internet users) having experienced an online sexual solicitation or approach in the last year. ("Sexual solicitations and approaches" are defined here as requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk, or to give personal sexual information, that are unwanted or, whether wanted or not, that are made by an adult.) These solicitations were diverse in nature, ranging from fairly benign requests about bra size to more troublesome requests and attempts for offline contact. Three percent of youth experienced an "aggressive solicitation," in which the solicitor had made offline contact through regular mail or by telephone, or had made attempts or requests for offline contact. Most youth were not bothered by the solicitations, but there was a core group of youth, approximately one out of every four solicited and one out of every three aggressively solicited, who were very or extremely upset or afraid.

Characteristics

Research has also provided some insight into the characteristics of the victim, offender, and location involved in these incidents. Sexual solicitations are more common among older teens (fourteen to seventeen years) and females. Solicitors were generally male (67 percent), but, contrary to the expectation, there were 19 percent perceived as being female. The majority of solicitors were other youth (48 percent), with 24 percent thought to be adults (eighteen and older). Almost all solicitors were people the youth did not know in person. But, as noted above, people on the Internet can easily alter their identities.

The majority of solicitations happened while youth were using the Internet at home (70 percent) or at someone else's home (22 percent). Solicitations most often took place in chat rooms (65 percent), with an additional 24 percent occurring through instant messages. Youth appear to know how to handle these situations, with many logging off the computer (28 percent) or leaving the site where it occurred (24 percent). Almost half of these solicitations were completely undisclosed by the youth, with only 10 percent being reported to an authority (i.e., Internet Service Provider, law enforcement, teacher).

UNWANTED EXPOSURE TO SEXUAL MATERIAL

The exposure of youth to sexual material has been a topic of interest for many decades, yet is inadequately studied, largely for ethical reasons. With the introduction of the Internet, discussion has intensified, based on the availability on the Internet of virtually any form of sexual material to youth without the knowledge of parents or other adults. Based on a normal teenage curiosity about sex, it is not surprising that some youth are actively seeking out pornographic material, especially on the Internet, that provides more privacy and wider access. This is an issue of concern to parents and professionals—one that has been a topic of discussion and debate for decades. A different issue, and one that has not really been of concern in the pornography debate until now, is the opportunity for youth to be exposed to sexual material inadvertently, when they do not want it or are not expecting it. Links and advertisements for pornographic Web sites are widespread on the Internet, even in sites devoted to children. Recent research indicates this unwanted, inadvertent exposure to sexual material to be a frequent occurrence.

Frequency and Impact.

The Youth Internet Safety Survey found 25 percent of youth (ten- to seventeen-year-old regular Internet users) had experienced an unwanted exposure to sexual material in the last year. ("Unwanted exposure to sexual material" is defined here as being exposed to pictures of naked people or of people having sex, when doing online searches, surfing the Web, or opening e-mail or e-mail links, and not seeking or expecting such pictures.) About one out of every four exposures was very or extremely upsetting to the youth. Other studies have reported that from 25 percent to 44 percent of

teens (thirteen to seventeen years) encountered Web sites that were X-rated or had sexual content. Amount of exposure tends to differ by age, with 45 percent of older teens (fourteen to seventeen years old) and 15 percent of younger (ten to thirteen years old) having seen an X-rated Web site, even if by accident.

Characteristics

Exposed youth are more likely to be older teens (fourteen to seventeen years old) and are slightly more likely to be males (57 percent). Exposures most commonly occurred on a computer at home (67 percent), school (15 percent), or at someone else's home (13 percent). Most of the youth came across this unwanted material while surfing the Web (71 percent), with another 28 percent exposed when opening e-mail or clicking on an e-mail link. When exposed through surfing the Web, sexual material often resulted from a search (47 percent), misspelled Web address (17 percent), or clicking on a link while in another site (17 percent). Furthermore, it was not uncommon for youth to be taken into another X-rated site when trying to exit the first one. The e-mail exposures were typically received at the child's personal e-mail address, with the sender almost always being unknown. Youth saw a variety of sexual material; they most often saw pictures of naked people, but 38 percent saw pictures of people having sex, and 8 percent saw pictures that involved sex and violence. Most of the unwanted exposures were undisclosed (44 percent), with 39 percent known to a parent, 3 percent reported to an Internet Service Provider, and none reported to law enforcement.

SUMMARY

The Internet is quickly becoming an important component in the lives of many people, especially children and adolescents. Yet, along with all the advantages the Internet provides, there exists a darker side that has created some concern. Approximately one out of every five youth who go online is sexually solicited in some manner. These sexual solicitations are more diverse than initially thought, with many solicitors being other youth and women. One out of every four youth encounters sexual material on the Internet when he or she does not want it or is not seeking it. Yet, whether the Internet poses qualitatively new perils for youth or whether these perils are similar to those already contributing to the problem of child maltreatment is still unknown.

Concern about child victimization on the Internet is certainly a real problem, but it will be some time before its true diversity and impact are thoroughly explored. It is important for parents and educators to be aware of the possible dangers so steps can be taken to help keep youth safe online. Talking with youth about these dangers—and how to handle them if they do occur—is one of the first steps that should be taken. In the meantime, researchers, law enforcement, prosecutors, and legislators are working to develop procedures for incorporating this new technology into society while keeping it a safe place for youth to learn and communicate.

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See also CYBERCRIME; DIGITAL CRIME

Further Reading

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