

'Internet predator' stereotypes debunked in new study

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Contrary to stereotype, most Internet sex offenders are not adults who target young children by posing as another youth, luring children to meetings, and then abducting or forcibly raping them, according to researchers who have studied the nature of Internet-initiated sex crimes.

Rather, most online sex offenders are adults who target teens and seduce victims into sexual relationships. They take time to develop the trust and confidence of victims, so that the youth see these relationships as romances or sexual adventures. The youth most vulnerable to online sex offenders have histories of sexual or physical abuse, family problems, and tendencies to take risks both on- and offline, the researchers say.

In short, the researchers draw a clearer picture about adults who troll the Internet for sex with minors in the study, "Online 'Predators' and Their Victims: Myths, Realities and Implications for Prevention," published in the February/March issue of *American Psychologist*. The journal is published by the American Psychological Association (APA).

The study was based on three surveys—two comprising telephone interviews of a combined 3,000 Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17; first in 2000 and again in 2005; and one involving 612 interviews with federal, state and local law enforcement officials in the United States between October 2001 and July 2002. These studies were conducted by the authors, Janis Wolak, JD, David Finkelhor, PhD, Kimberly Mitchell, PhD and Michele Ybarra, PhD, at the Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire.

“To prevent these crimes, we need accurate information about their true dynamics,” said Janis Wolak, lead author of the study. “The things that we hear and fear and the things that actually occur may not be the same. The newness of the environment makes it hard to see where the danger is.”

For example, in spite of public concern, the authors found that adolescents’ use of popular social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook do not appear to increase their risk of being victimized by online predators. Rather, it is risky online interactions such as talking online about sex to unknown people that increases vulnerability, according to the researchers.

“Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who are open about their interest in sex,” Wolak said. “The offenders use instant messages, e-mail and chat rooms to meet and develop intimate relationships with their victims. In most of the cases, the victims are aware that they are talking online with adults.”

“A majority of the offenders are charged with crimes such as statutory rape, that involve non-forcible sexual activity with adolescent victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults,” she added.

Current educational efforts that are focused on discouraging children from giving out or posting personal information, warning about deception online, and urging parents to monitor their children may not be effective, according to the authors.

Wolak and her colleagues say more effort should be directed at helping teens appreciate the drawbacks and inappropriateness of romantic relationships with adults. These efforts should include frank discussions of the dynamics of Internet-initiated sex crimes. Since many of the

victims do not have good relationships with parents, ways to reach vulnerable teens directly, through sources they find credible, need to be found.

Among the study's other findings:

-- Internet offenders pretended to be teenagers in only 5 percent of the crimes studied by researchers.

-- Nearly 75 percent of victims who met offenders face-to-face did so more than once.

-- Online sex offenders are seldom violent, and cases involving stalking or abduction are very rare.

-- Youth who engaged in four or more risky online behaviors were much more likely to report receiving online sexual solicitations. The online risky behaviors included maintaining buddy lists that included strangers, discussing sex online with people they did not know in person and being rude or nasty online.

-- Boys who are gay or are questioning their sexuality may be more susceptible to Internet-initiated sex crimes than other populations. Researchers found boys were the victims in nearly one-quarter of criminal cases, and most cases included facts that suggested victims were gay or questioning their sexuality.

Source: American Psychological Association

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