

Young sexual abuse victims may be at more risk online

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Teenage girls' internet activity—together with offline risk factors—can increase their risk of online victimization, and this is more likely for those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, suggests a study published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

Previous research has indicated that [internet use](#) in general is not problematic for teenagers. However, internet users may be vulnerable to internet sex crimes and cyberbullying. Understanding online activity and how this relates to risk is important, yet previous studies have relied solely upon teenagers' own accounts of their internet activity.

Jennie Noll and colleagues provided laptops to 460 teenage girls aged 12–16, recruited from child welfare agencies, and monitored their internet activity over four weeks. Of this group, 156 individuals had experienced substantiated childhood sexual abuse. All participants were interviewed to measure psychological and social wellbeing, sexual behaviors and if they had experienced online victimization. These interviews

were then repeated two years later. Overall, the authors found that the teenagers could be placed into three groups on the basis of their online and offline activity. Individuals within the group that displayed high levels of [internet](#) activity and low psychological and social wellbeing were at the highest risk of online victimization. This included an [increased risk](#) of being cyberbullied and receiving upsetting online sexual solicitations. Girls who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were more likely to be included within this high-risk group.

These findings suggest that both online and offline factors contribute to the risk of [teenage girls](#) becoming victimized online, and that survivors of childhood [sexual abuse](#) may be at a higher risk. However, the authors highlight several caveats that should be considered when drawing general conclusions. For instance, the study was conducted only between 2012 and 2015, the results highlight the risks and not the causes of victimization, and the generalizability to all teenagers was not examined.

More information: Jennie G. Noll et al, An observational study of Internet behaviours for adolescent females following sexual abuse, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-021-01187-5](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01187-5)

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