What we know (and don’t know) about Internet sex offenders

Findings from research funded by the US Dept. of Justice, OJJDP
ATSA 30TH ANNUAL RESEARCH AND TREATMENT CONFERENCE
Toronto

Crimes against Children Research Center
Janis.Wolak@unh.edu
Overview

- What is an Internet sex offender? And have they changed in the past decade?
- Are sex offenses increasing because of the Internet?
- Should we distinguish “Internet sex offenders” from other sex offenders?
Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation crimes ending in arrest:

- **NJOV**₁: 612 interviews, arrests between July 1, 2000 & June 30, 2001
- **NJOV**₂: 1,051 interviews, arrests during 2006
- **NJOV**₃: 1,299 interviews, arrests in 2009
National Juvenile Online Victimization Study

How the research was conducted

- Mail surveys to a national sample of US law enforcement agencies (n=~2,500)
  - 3 sampling frames (ICAC & federal agencies, trained agencies, all other agencies)
  - Data weighted at agency and case level for selection and non-response
  - Weighting allows us to create national estimates
- Mail surveys to determine if agencies had relevant cases, followed by telephone interviews with investigators about specific cases
First, what is the Internet?

- Internet & related technologies
  - Rapidly changing capabilities
  - Rapidly changing forms
  - Uneven but wide dissemination
- Migration of social activities to the Internet
  - Changing how we communicate, entertain ourselves, record events, establish romantic and sexual relationships and get information

Our research includes all Internet-related technologies (e.g., desktop, laptop, game console, iPad, cell phones – smart or not, Skype, web cam)
What is an Internet sex offender?

Sex offenders are very diverse

- **Relationships to victims**
  - Family members, caretakers, acquaintances (coaches, priests, family friends, etc.), peers, strangers

- **Sexual interests**
  - Girls, boys, both
  - Age group (prepubescent, pubescent, adult)

- **Tactics**
  - Violence, coercion, friendship, seduction
Sexual offenses are diverse

- Contact offenses, forcible
  - Sexual assault, rape

- Contact offenses, non-forcible
  - Statutory rape, incest

- Non-contact offenses
  - Production of child pornography, voyeurism, exhibitionism, online luring, cybersex
What is an Internet sex offender?

3 types of technology-facilitated crimes

1) Crimes with identified victims
   - Offenders use the Internet to meet victims (online predators)
   - Offenders use the Internet to facilitate sex crimes against family members & face-to-face acquaintances

2) Solicitations to UC investigators

3) Child pornography possession & distribution
What is an Internet sex offender?

Focus on
Online meeting offenders
- Internet predators

Internet "family & acquaintance" offenders
- Conventional child sexual abusers, use Internet to facilitate crimes against family members, acquaintances
- CP possessors/distributors
Online meeting offenders generally...

- Target adolescents
- Are open about wanting sex
- Are open about being adults
- Seduce or otherwise find willing victims
- Victims are too young to consent to sexual activity
- Contact sex offenses in about 2/3 of cases
**Case example: Online meeting offender**

- Kurt, 56, met Alice, 13, thru a social networking site. Alice said she was 18. They talked online for several months and exchanged nude photos. Alice had severe conflicts with her mother. When Kurt asked why she didn’t move out, Alice admitted she was 13. Kurt drove to her house and she ran away with him. The crime was discovered when police stopped Kurt for a traffic violation.

- Kurt was divorced and had 4 adult children. There was no evidence of any prior sexual offenses or criminal behavior.
Case Example: Online meeting offender

Marcy’s parents found nude pictures of her on her computer. Marcy, 14, admitted sending the pictures to Ellis, a 37 year old man she met online. Ellis was communicating with numerous adolescent girls. Police were able to identify 8 or 9 victims ages 12 to 16 that had sent him sexual images. He seemed to target victims who struggled with self image; many were over-weight or had skin problems. Victims told police that Ellis “made them feel good.” He did not meet any of his victims face-to-face. He had a large CP collection on his computer.
Tom and Lori met through a social networking site when they were 19 and 12, respectively. They talked online and by cell phone and occasionally met and did things together for a couple of years. When Lori was 14 and Tom 21, they were discovered together in the backseat of a car having sex. He pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor and had to register as a sex offender.
Case Example: Online meeting offender

- Adam, 21, got Cindy’s phone number from a friend of hers that he knew. Adam and Cindy, 12, texted back and forth for several days and exchanged nude photos. Cindy’s mother found Adam’s photo and reported the case to police. When police searched Adam’s phone, they found the pictures of Cindy, nude pictures of Adam’s fiancee and adult pornography videos. On Cindy’s phone they found the pictures of her and Adam and a video of her having sex with another minor.
Changes in the past decade: Arrest cases

More arrested online meeting offenders were

- Age 25 or less
  - 53% in 2009, compared to 24% in 2000-1

- Ethnically/racially diverse
  - 68% were non-Hispanic White in 2009, compared to 89% in 2000-1

- Fewer possessed child pornography
  - 16% in 2009, compared to 39% in 2000-1

All significant at $p \leq .001$
Are online meeting crimes a new form of sexual abuse?

About \( \frac{1}{4} \) of reports of sex crimes against minors in the US involve statutory rape (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005)

- Non-forcible sex crimes
- Most offenders are male and younger than 25
- Most victims ages 13 – 15
  - Underage – too young to consent to sexual activity
Most sex offenders abuse/molest children they know in person

This is also true for Internet sex offenders

- Many Internet sex offenders abused and molested children & teens who were family members and face-to-face acquaintances
  - Internet “Family and Acquaintance (F&A)” crimes
  - More arrests of Internet F&A offenders than of online meeting offenders
Arrests of online predators compared to arrests of Internet F&A offenders

- Offender met V online
  - 2000–1: 508
  - 2006: 615
  - 2009: 844

- Family & acq offenders
  - 2000–1: 490
  - 2006: 877
  - 2009: 2,164
How do Internet F&A offenders use the Internet?

- Develop private relationships, set up meetings
- Seduce/groom
- Solicit & transmit photos
- Sometimes deceive

About 2/3 of F&A cases include production of child pornography

In 2009, about 1/3 of cases involved images and text messages on cell phones
An 6 year old girl complained to her mother that her grandfather had fondled her and showed her a video on his computer of children having sex with adults.

A man sexually abused his daughter for years, photographed the abuse and distributed the images on the Internet.
More arrested Internet F&A offenders were

- **Minors**
  - 16% 17 or younger in 2009, compared to 5% in 2000-1

- **Younger than 25**
  - 43% age 25 or less in 2009, compared to 12%

- **Acquaintances of victims (not family)**
  - 72% in 2009, compared to 58%

All significant at $p \leq .001$
Changes in the past decade: Arrest cases

Arrested Internet F&A offenders--
Fewer possessed child pornography
  • 33% in 2009, compared to 65% in 2000-1

There were more

▶ Teen victims
  • 66% age 13 to 17, compared to 46% in 2000-1

▶ Non-contact offenses
  • 46% in 2009, compared to 4% in 2000-1

All significant at $p \leq .001$
Non-contact offenses: Sexual advances

- A man, 30, sent a nude picture of himself to his girlfriend’s daughter, 14. The girl might have become involved with him, but her foster mother found the picture on her cell phone and reported the incident.

- A boy, 16, met a man, 47, in a technology store. They chatted & exchanged cell phone #s. The man texted sexual advances to the boy, who told his father, who told police. The man was a registered sex offender.
Non-contact offenses: CP production

The offender, 32, used his cell phone to take nude photos of his step-daughter, 12, through a crack in the bathroom door as she showered. He admitted to being infatuated with her. She did not realize this had happened and he never molested her. His wife found the photos on his cell phone.
The offender, 32, created a fictitious modeling agency. He solicited local girls, ages 11 through 17, to pose nude. He sent them adult and child pornography to show them poses, and he paid for the pictures girls sent him. He was discovered when a youth overheard one of the victims bragging about the money she made and told a parent, who called the police.
Definition: Youth-produced sexual images

Images

- Created by minors (age 17 or younger)
- Depicting self or other minors
- Are or could be child pornography under applicable criminal statutes
  - Includes creation, distribution or possession
  - Technology-facilitated (e.g., cell phone, webcam, digital camera)
Internet offenders: Youth-produced sexual images

In 2009
- About one-third of Internet sex offenses with identified victims included youth-produced sexual images
  - About 1/3 of online meeting cases
  - About 1/3 of Internet F&A offender cases
Juvenile offenders: Youth-produced images

- A boy, 14, harassed an 11 year old girl by sending her pornography, sexual messages and nude pictures of himself. Police described the boy as “very disturbed.”
- A girl, 16, was pressured to send sexual pictures of herself to her boyfriend, 15. When they broke up, he threatened to post the images unless she sent additional pictures. When she refused, he sent 3 friends links to the images. One told the victim, who told the police and got a restraining order. The boy had other child pornography on his computer and a prior arrest for molesting a 12 year old girl.
Who were Internet sex offenders with identified victims?

- Getting younger
- Largely adolescent victims
- More acquaintance offenders among F&A group
- Lower rates of CP possession
- More non-contact crimes
Who were not Internet sex offenders?

- Violent offenders – 5% force or threats
- Stranger offenders
  - No prior relationship to victim

No change from previous years
Most Internet sex offenders with identified victims are not pedophiles.
Motivation to molest adolescents

Offenders may

- Enjoy admiration from victims who are sexually responsive but naïve
- Want to relive adolescence – feel popular & desired
- Fear adult partners, feel safer with young partners
- Enjoy feeling in control of the relationship
- Crave the increased arousal of illicit sex

(Nunez, 2003)
Motivation to molest adolescents

- Sexual development of teen victims ranged widely
- Half of offenders were teens or young adults

- Age of victim may not fully reflect sexual interests of offender
  - Unsuccessful in forming relationships with adults
  - Interested in younger children but no access
  - Does not realize victim is underage
Who were Internet sex offenders with identified victims?

- Voyeuristic offenders
- Production of child pornography
  - Many CP producers do not distribute images
- About 10% of Internet sex offenders with identified victims were deeply involved with online CP
  - They downloaded CP, produced Cp and distributed produced images
Consistent and substantial increases in arrests

- About 4,900 arrests in 2009 involved CP
  - About 1,700 in 2000-1
- About 70% were CP only
- Increasingly, arrests are generated by law enforcement
- Pro-active investigations of CP trading
  - 47% of arrests versus 16% in 2000-1
Suspects arrested for CP possession were diverse.

- Male, largely non-Hispanic white
- Diverse in age, education, income & other personal characteristics
- Single at time of arrest – about 2/3
- Lived with minor children – about ¼
- Diagnosed mental disorder – about 5%
- Prior arrests for sexual offenses – about 10%
- Registered sex offenders – about 5%
Changes in the past decade: Arrest cases

More arrested CP offenders

- Were young adults*
  - 19% age 25 or less in 2009, versus 11% in 2000-1

- Were ethnically/racially diverse**
  - 84% non-Hispanic White in 2009, versus 91%

- Had prior arrests for non-sexual offenses**
  - 32% in 2009, compared to 22%

≤ .05, **p ≤ .01
In 2009, 1 in 10 investigations of CP possession caught child molesters.

Of 2009 arrest cases,
- 78% began with investigations of CP possession
- 22% began with suspicions of child molestation or UC chat investigations

Of the cases that began with investigations of CP possession:
- 1 in 10 caught offenders who had molested children.
- 1 in 5 caught molesters or offenders with past arrests for sex crimes against children
In previous years, 1 in 6 CP investigations found molesters

Yr 2000-1: 83% Child molester, 17% CP only
Yr 2006: 84% Child molester, 16% CP only
Yr 2009: 90% Child molester, 10% CP only
CP offenders had more extreme images

- Showed victim age 3 or less: 2000-1 (19%), 2006 (28%), 2009 (28%)
- Showed sexual violence: 2000-1 (21%), 2006 (24%), 2009 (33%)
- Videos: 2000-1 (39%), 2006 (58%), 2009 (65%)
Changes appear related to changes in police tactics: Proactive p2p investigations

- Programs used by police can determine the content, number and format of images
- Police don’t have the resources to investigate every case
- Sentencing enhancements and other factors encourage targeting those with images that depict violence or younger children, greater numbers of images and distributors
Concerns that the Internet is increasing child sexual abuse...

It’s counter-intuitive, but child sexual abuse has decreased substantially since the mid-1990s – and it continues to decrease.
Sexual Abuse Substantiation Rates: 1990–2009

61% Decline (1992-2009)

5% Decline (2008-2009)

Source: NCANDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Abuse</td>
<td>-44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phys. Abuse</td>
<td>-23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emot. Abuse</td>
<td>-33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Neglect</td>
<td>-20%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Change in rate not statistically significant
FBI Forcible Rape Rate & NCANDS Sexual Abuse Rate (1990–2009)

Forcible Rape

Sexual Abuse

33% Decline 1992 - 2009

59% Decline 1990 - 2008

Source: FBI, Crime in the United States Reports and NCANDS

34% Decline

28% Decline

Note: respondents are 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students enrolled in public schools in selected Minnesota school districts.

Source: Minnesota Student Survey, 1992-2010

52% Decline

*Known offenders are family members or acquaintances; unknown offenders are strangers or unidentified.

Source: National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), each year, for number of incidents; Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) calculations for rates.
Should we distinguish Internet sex offenders from other sex offenders?
**Internet sex offenders: Who are they?**

CP traders only or offenders that interact with victims?
Online “predators” only or conventional abusers who use the Internet?
Any Internet use in a crime or crime committed totally online?
Internet central to crime versus more incidental?
Exclude any offender who commits an entirely offline offense?
**Internet sex offenders: Who are they?**

Relevant comparison group: rapists? child molesters? other paraphilias? statutory rapists? young adult offenders?

Time frame: Do findings about Internet offenders lose validity because of changes in technology?

Migration of social life to the Internet: How much is the population of Internet sex offenders defined by demographics that pertain to use of technology?

- Unique offenders, or just Internet users?
Functions of the Internet in sexual offending

- The Internet facilitates certain types of offenses
  - Nonforcible offenses
  - Non-contact crimes
  - Voyeuristic
  - Offenses that involve images
- Biggest impact has been the broad expansion of access to CP
- Another impact has been to show vividly what child sexual abuse looks like
For crimes with identified victims

- Profiles of offenders and victims may match demographic profiles of Internet users
  - Rather than indicating emergence of new types of offenses

- Distinctions between online “predators” and family & acquaintance offenders may not be relevant
Functions of the Internet in sexual offending

Not just a tool for sex offenders

- Technology use could increase chances of getting caught
  - Images and messages on computers and cell phones are sources of disclosure
  - Gives investigative opportunities to law enforcement

- Provides evidence
  - Corroboration of victim allegations

- Information about offenders interests and activities
Thank you! to the hundreds of law enforcement investigators who have assisted with the National Juvenile Online Victimization Study.

The research was funded by the US Department of Justice, OJJDP. Points of view or opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent official positions or policies of DOJ.
Many NJOV Study papers and reports are available at our website:

www.unh.edu/ccrc

We welcome inquiries about our research.

Please contact:

Janis.Wolak@unh.edu