

**Fantasy Versus Contact-Driven Online Offenders: Are They Distinct Groups?**

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Online solicitation of children is an ever-growing social and legal concern, with one international study suggesting that approximately 750,000 sexual predators are connected to the internet at any time (Maalla, 2009). Two distinct groups of offenders who solicit children in chatrooms have been identified: contact-offenders (i.e., solicitation with the goal of meeting the child), and fantasy-driven offenders (i.e., engaging solely in online sexual dialogue). One study found that fantasy-driven offenders are motivated by social isolation and dysphoric mood, while contact-driven offenders utilize internet chatrooms as a vehicle for sexually abusing children (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011). A paucity of research has been conducted permitting a more informed distinction between these two groups. An empirically-informed distinction is critical at the point of evaluation when the question of risk is raised, and vital in treatment planning.

**Methods**

**Participants.** Forty-three fantasy-driven (i.e., engaged in chatroom conversations with minors, but never attempted a meeting) and thirty-six contact-driven (i.e., attempted a meeting) offenders who completed a self-report survey. All participants were previously convicted of an internet-based ( $n=33$ ), child sexual abuse ( $n=38$ ), or other ( $n=8$ ) sex offense. They were from the community ( $n=39$ ) and incarcerated ( $n=40$ ) across eight states and Ontario. The average age was 38 years; the majority were Caucasian ( $n=68$ ) and heterosexual ( $n=65$ ).

**Variables.** Offenders responded to questions about demographics (i.e., education level, employment status), social history (i.e., history of physical and sexual abuse, marital status, close friends, residing with a romantic partner), sexual history (i.e., number of teenage and lifetime sexual partners; the use of non-deviant, deviant, and/or child pornography), psychiatric history (i.e., presence of general and social anxiety, depression, and anger), and antisocial behaviors.

**Results.** Results indicated there were no differences between fantasy- and contact-driven offenders in terms of history of education ( $\chi^2[1]=1.866, p=.172$ ), employment ( $\chi^2[1]=.059, p=.808$ ), marriage ( $\chi^2[1]=2.905, p=.088$ ), living with a romantic partner ( $\chi^2[1]=.768, p=.381$ ), or close friends ( $\chi^2[1]=1.118, p=.290$ ). There were no differences in childhood victimization of physical abuse ( $\chi^2[1]=.036, p=.849$ ) or sexual abuse ( $\chi^2[1]=.126, p=.723$ ). Regarding sexual history, there were no differences in number of teenage ( $t[60]=-1.241, p=.219$ ) or lifetime ( $t[70]=.646, p=.296$ ) sexual partners. Moreover, there were no differences in consumption of non-deviant ( $t[77]=1.019, p=.311$ ), deviant ( $t[77]=.077, p=.939$ ), teenage ( $t[77]=.264, p=.792$ ), or child pornography ( $t[77]=.528, p=.600$ ). No differences were found for social anxiety ( $t[77]=.994, p=.324$ ), depression ( $t[77]=-.689, p=.493$ ), or anger ( $t[77]=-.281, p=.780$ ); however, contact offenders reported significantly more symptoms of general anxiety ( $t[77]=-2.208, p=.030$ ). The two groups did not differ in histories of antisocial behaviors ( $t[77]=.951, p=.345$ ).

**Discussion.** Overall, with the exception of anxiety, we found support for the null hypothesis in all group comparisons. Contact- and fantasy-driven offenders did not differ on demographic, social, sexual, antisocial behavior, or psychiatric variables, suggesting that (1) the distinction is inherently

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2020 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 22 | POSTER

not a meaningful one, or (2) the operationalization of “fantasy” is misguided. Fantasy is an endogenous characteristic that may be present in varying degrees in both groups, and thus is not a pivotal group-distinguishing feature. What may be gleaned from these findings is that the assumption of fantasy as a driving factor may need to be explored irrespective of whether the individual met the victim in person or remained stationed at the computer. As always, an idiographic evaluation and treatment is essential for offenders (regardless of which group they fall under). Ultimately, the critical consideration for future research in this area is under what conditions does fantasy increased the likelihood of an unwanted outcome.

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