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Internet Crimes Against Children

New computer technology presents complex challenges for law enforcement agencies and victim service providers. These professionals must protect Internet users as they conduct investigations, secure evidence, identify and apprehend offenders, and help child victims and their families. Based on the knowledge and experience of those working with child victims, this Bulletin focuses attention on child victims of Internet-based crimes, highlighting the challenges for law enforcement personnel and victim service providers, examining who the child victims are, and determining how best to respond to these victims' needs and the needs of their families.

Introduction

The growth of technology has changed our lives dramatically. Computers were viewed as a luxury or even an extravagance 30 years ago. We relied on television, newspapers, and radio as primary sources of news and information. Cables, modems, and online services were virtually nonexistent.

Today, computers are prevalent in businesses, homes, schools, libraries, and even airports. The World Wide Web provides instant access to news, reference information, shopping, banking, stock trading, auctions, and travel information and reservations. People routinely use the Internet to take college courses, play games, listen to music, and view videos. Chat rooms and e-mails are now replacing telephones as our favorite means of long-distance communication.

The proliferation of computer technology obviously has enhanced our lives in many ways, such as enabling improved productivity and efficiency at work, school, and home. Anyone with access to a computer and modem now has unparalleled recreational and educational opportunities.

Unfortunately, criminals are also using modern technology—to prey on innocent victims. Computers and the Internet have made the predator's job easier. Historically, child predators found their victims in public places where children tend to gather—schoolyards, playgrounds, and shopping malls. Today, with so many children online, the Internet provides predators a new place—

About This Bulletin

Children have always been vulnerable to victimization. Their trusting natures and naivete make them perfect targets for perpetrators—both people they know and those they don't. As children grow into adolescents, they remain vulnerable to victimization. Youth are often curious and eager to try new things. Many youth struggle with issues of rebellion and independence and seek attention and affection from people outside the home, often by using computers. Today, an estimated 10 million children are using the Internet. By 2005, approximately 77 million kids will be online. With so many children online, today's predators can easily find and exploit them. For predators, the Internet is a new, effective, and more anonymous way to seek out and groom children for criminal purposes such as producing and distributing child pornography, contacting and stalking children for the purpose of engaging in sexual acts, and exploiting children for sexual tourism for personal and commercial purposes.

The nature of Internet crimes presents complex new challenges for law enforcement agencies and victim service providers with regard to investigating crimes, collecting evidence, identifying

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and apprehending offenders, and assisting child victims and their families. For example, victims and perpetrators are often separated geographically, which may hamper investigation efforts. Also, victims are often ashamed and reluctant to come forward, which makes identifying offenders difficult. These challenges are being addressed by federal and local law enforcement agencies, but there is still much to learn about preventing, identifying, and investigating Internet-based crimes against children.

This Bulletin is based on the experiences of professionals now working with child victims of Internet crimes and their families. It highlights some of the challenges law enforcement and victim service professionals face in addressing Internet crimes against children and focuses attention on child victims of these crimes by examining who they are and how best to respond to their needs and the needs of their families.

cyberspace—to target children for criminal acts. This approach eliminates many of the risks predators face when making contact in person.

Scope of the Problem

The sheer number of young people using computers today makes our concern for them well founded. Recent years have seen a great increase in access to and use of the Internet. By the end of 1998, more than 40 percent of all American homes had computers, and 25 percent had Internet access.[1] This trend is expected to continue. Children and teenagers are one of the fastest growing groups of Internet users. An estimated 10 million kids are online today. By the year 2002, this figure is expected to increase to 45 million, and by 2005 to 77 million.[2]

With so many youth online and vulnerable to predators, it is extremely important for parents, law enforcement officials, prosecutors, and victim service providers to know as much as possible about Internet crimes against children so they can prevent victimization and prosecute offenders.

Children as Targets of Internet Crimes—Who Is Vulnerable?

Traditionally, both intrafamilial offenders and strangers have found that young children and teenagers are perfect targets for criminal acts because they are often trusting, naive, curious, adventuresome, and eager for attention and affection. However, the most attractive factor to predators is that children and teenagers historically have not been viewed as credible witnesses. Today, the danger to children is even greater because the Internet provides predators anonymity. Whether the victimization occurs in person or over the Internet, the process is the same—the perpetrator uses information to target a child victim. For example, the predator may initiate an online friendship with a young person, sharing hobbies and interests. This may lead to the exchange of gifts and pictures. Just like the traditional predator who targets children in person, the online predator usually is willing to spend considerable time befriending and grooming a child. The predator wants to build the child's trust, which will allow the predator to get what he or she ultimately wants from the child.

Although no family is immune to the possibility that their child may be exploited and harassed on the Internet, a few factors make some children more vulnerable than others. Older children tend to be at greater risk because they often use the computer unsupervised and are more likely to engage in online discussions of a personal nature. Some victims become unwitting participants as they actively participate in chat rooms, trade e-mail messages, and send pictures online. Troubled or rebellious teens who are seeking emancipation from parental authority can be susceptible to Internet predators. The risk of victimization is greater for emotionally vulnerable youth who may be dealing with issues of sexual identity. These young people may be willing to engage in conversation that is both titillating and exciting but appears innocent and harmless. Unfortunately, Internet interactions that initially appear innocent can gradually lead to sexually explicit conduct.[3]

Types of Internet Victimization

Internet crimes are often thought of as victimless. Nothing could be further from the truth. Children and teenagers can and do become victims of Internet crimes. Predators contact teenagers and children over the Internet and victimize them by

- Enticing them through online contact for the purpose of engaging them in sexual acts.
- Using the Internet for the production, manufacture, and distribution of child pornography.
- Using the Internet to expose youth to child pornography and encourage them to exchange pornography.
- Enticing and exploiting children for the purpose of sexual tourism (travel with the intent to engage in sexual behavior) for commercial gain and/or personal gratification.

Unique Characteristics of Cybercrimes

Several characteristics distinguish Internet crimes from other crimes committed against children:

Physical contact between the child and the perpetrator does not need to occur for a child to become a victim or for a crime to be committed. Innocent pictures or images of children can be digitally transformed into pornographic material and distributed across the Internet without the victims' knowledge.

The Internet provides a source for repeated, long-term victimization of a child that can last for years, often without the victim's knowledge. Once a child's picture is displayed on the Internet, it can remain there forever. Images can stay on the Internet indefinitely without damage to the quality of the image.

These crimes transcend jurisdictional boundaries, often involving multiple victims from different communities, states, and countries. The geographic location of a child is not a primary concern for perpetrators who target victims over the Internet. Often, perpetrators travel hundreds of miles to different states and countries to engage in sexual acts with children they met over the Internet. Many of these cases involve local, state, federal, and international law enforcement entities in multiple jurisdictions.

Many victims of Internet crimes do not disclose their victimization or even realize that they have been victims of a crime. Whereas children who experience physical or sexual abuse may disclose the abuse to a friend, teacher, or parent, many victims of Internet crimes remain anonymous until pictures or images are discovered by law enforcement during an investigation. The presumed anonymity of Internet activities often provides a false sense of security and secrecy for both the perpetrator and the victim.

Youth Internet Safety Survey

Although it was clear that young people are using the Internet in ever-increasing numbers, no research existed on how many youth encounter unwanted sexual solicitations and exposure to sexual material and harassment online. To obtain a clearer picture of the scope of the problem, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) provided funding to Dr. David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, to conduct a research survey in 1999 on Internet victimization of youth. His research provides the best profile of this problem to date.

Crimes Against Children Research Center staff interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,501 youth, aged 10 to 17, who used the Internet regularly. "Regular use" was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past 6 months on a computer at home, at school, in a library, at someone else's home, or in some other place.

Survey Areas

The survey looked at four types of online victimization of youth, which Finkelhor[4] defined as

- Sexual solicitation and approaches: Requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or to give personal sexual information that were unwanted or, whether wanted or not, made by an adult.
- Aggressive sexual solicitation: Sexual solicitations involving offline contact with the perpetrator through mail, by telephone, or in person, or attempts or requests for offline contact.
- Unwanted exposure to sexual material: When online, opening e-mail, or opening e-mail links, and not seeking or expecting sexual material, being exposed to pictures of naked people or people having sex.
- Harassment: Threats or other offensive content (not sexual solicitation) sent online to the youth or posted online for others to see.

The survey also explored Internet safety practices used by youth and their families, what factors may put some youth more at risk for victimization than others, and the families' knowledge of how to report online solicitations and harassment.

Statistical Findings

The survey results offered the following statistical highlights:[5]

- One in 5 youth received a sexual approach or solicitation over the Internet in the past year.
- One in 33 youth received an aggressive sexual solicitation in the past year. This means a predator asked a young person to meet somewhere, called a young person on the phone, and/or sent the young person correspondence, money, or gifts through the U.S. Postal Service.
- One in 4 youth had an unwanted exposure in the past year to pictures of naked people or people having sex.
- One in 17 youth was threatened or harassed in the past year.

- Most young people who reported these incidents were not very disturbed about them, but a few found them distressing.
- Only a fraction of all episodes was reported to authorities such as the police, an Internet service provider, or a hotline.
- About 25 percent of the youth who encountered a sexual approach or solicitation told a parent. Almost 40 percent of those reporting an unwanted exposure to sexual material told a parent.
- Only 17 percent of youth and 11 percent of parents could name a specific authority, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), CyberTipline, or an Internet service provider, to which they could report an Internet crime, although more indicated they were vaguely aware of such authorities.
- In households with home Internet access, one-third of parents said they had filtering or blocking software on their computers.

Other Findings

The survey results confirm what is already known: although the Internet is a wonderfully fun and educational tool, it can also be very dangerous. According to the survey, one in five youth who regularly use the Internet received sexual solicitations or approaches during a 1-year period. The survey also found that offenses and offenders are more diverse than previously thought. In addition to pedophiles, other predators use the Internet. Nearly half (48 percent) of the offenders were other youth, and one-fourth of the aggressive episodes were initiated by females. Further, 77 percent of targeted youth were age 14 or older—not an age characteristically targeted by pedophiles. Although the youth stopped most solicitations by leaving the Web site, logging off, or blocking the sender, the survey confirmed current thinking that some youth are particularly vulnerable to online advances.

Most youth reported not being distressed by sexual exposures online. However, a significant 23 percent reported being very or extremely upset, 20 percent reported being very or extremely embarrassed, and 20 percent reported at least one symptom of stress. These findings point to the need for more research on the effects on youth of unwanted exposure to sexual materials and the indicators of potentially exploitative adult-youth relationships.

The large number of solicitations that went unreported by youth and families was of particular interest. This underreporting is attributed to feelings of embarrassment or guilt, ignorance that the incident was a reportable act, ignorance of how to report it, and perhaps resignation to a certain level of inappropriate behavior in the world.

Possibly due to the nature and small sample size of the survey, there were no reported incidences of traveler cases.[6] The survey also revealed no incidences of completed Internet seduction or sexual exploitation, including trafficking of child pornography. Despite the findings of this survey, law enforcement agencies report increasing incidents of Internet crimes against children.

Recommendations

Among the many findings of Finkelhor's survey, the most significant is that we are only beginning to realize the extent of the complex and increasingly prevalent phenomenon of Internet-based crimes against children. We have much to learn about the magnitude of the problem, the characteristics of its victims and perpetrators, its impact on children, and strategies for prevention and intervention.

Information and Intervention Resources

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is a comprehensive resource for families, victim service practitioners, and law enforcement personnel. NCMEC is supported by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and functions as a clearinghouse and resource center for collecting and distributing information about missing, runaway, and sexually exploited children, including exploitation resulting from Internet solicitations. In partnership with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Customs Service, and FBI, NCMEC operates the CyberTipline, an online form for reporting suspected child sexual exploitation (www.missingkids.com/cybertip), and the Child Pornography Tipline (1–800–843–5678). Through the Cyber Tipline and the telephone hotline, NCMEC

- Receives reports 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, of child sexual exploitation and the production and distribution of pornography on the Internet. Calls to the toll-free Child Pornography Tipline can be received from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the United Kingdom.
- Receives reports of offenses such as child pornography, child sex tourism, online enticement of children for sexual acts, and child

sexual molestation (outside the family). Analysts review each report and provide information to investigating law enforcement agencies.

- Provides leads on child exploitation cases to appropriate law enforcement authorities and agencies.

NCMEC case managers work directly with law enforcement personnel, offering technical assistance, resources, information, and advice on child sexual exploitation. NCMEC also has developed specialized training programs, materials, and curricula designed for law enforcement personnel. Training is available at little or no cost to local jurisdictions through OJJDP. For more information on current programs, call 1–800–843–5678.

Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program

In 1998, the Missing Children's Program of OJJDP initiated its Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force program, a national effort to combat the threat of offenders who use the Internet to sexually exploit children. Through this program, state and local law enforcement agencies can acquire the skills, equipment, and personnel resources to respond effectively to ICAC offenses. The program encourages law enforcement agencies to develop specialized multijurisdictional, multiagency responses to prevent, interdict, investigate, and prosecute Internet crimes against children. As of mid-2000, 30 ICAC task forces were participating in the ICAC task force program. Each task force is composed of federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel; federal and local prosecution officials; local educators; and service providers such as mental health professionals. These task forces serve as valuable regional resources for assistance to parents, educators, prosecutors, law enforcement personnel, and others who work on child victimization issues. You can obtain more information on this and other law enforcement programs from the OJJDP Web site at ojjdp.ncjrs.org/programs/programs.html.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

The FBI has established the Innocent Images program to focus specifically on computer-facilitated child sexual exploitation. Each FBI Field Division has designated two Crimes Against Children Coordinators to work with state and local law enforcement officials to investigate and prosecute cases that cross jurisdictional boundaries. OVC has placed a victim witness coordinator in the Innocent Images program to focus greater attention on the needs of child victims.

U.S. Postal Inspection Service

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service protects children online by monitoring the transmission of child pornography through the mail. Increased amounts of pornography are being sent through U.S. mail as more illicit Web sites emerge advertising child pornographic material for sale. In response, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service is tracking down these materials. In addition, the U.S. Customs Service Cyber Smuggling Center monitors the illegal generation, importation, and proliferation of child pornography.

The Future

The future holds many challenges for those fighting Internet crimes against young people. Cases involving Internet crimes against children are complex and labor intensive for both the police and prosecutors. The time between victimization and arrest can be lengthy. These cases are usually multijurisdictional, which presents challenges in the investigation and prosecution of a case and can present problems for the criminal justice system, the child victim, and the family in terms of resources, travel, and court appearances.

Challenges

Child victimization on the Internet is a complex matter. The full impact of such victimization on children is not completely understood. Family dynamics often play a significant role in children's denial of a crime and their willingness to participate in the investigation and prosecution. A child's ability to acknowledge and accept the crime can be linked to family values, peer pressure, and feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment. Denial and recantation can be common among children who unwittingly participated in the crime. Because of these issues, the greatest challenges facing law enforcement and victim service professionals are to identify the victims, protect their privacy, and serve them without further victimization.

Until more knowledge is gathered about Internet crime and its effects on victims, law enforcement and victim service professionals will continue working on Internet child exploitation using the tactics and standard approaches that have proved effective for working with other types of child victims. These tactics and approaches are discussed below.

For Children

- Ensure that the interview is conducted with developmentally appropriate language. A child's ability to relate to concepts and receive messages varies depending on his or her stage of development. The interviewer must assess the child's developmental level and adapt the interview accordingly.

- Ensure that the interview is conducted in a culturally sensitive manner with culturally appropriate

language. Determine which words the child is comfortable with. Is an interpreter needed? If so, use a professional interpreter and not a family member. Family members inadvertently may interject their interpretations into the translation and may prejudice the child's account.

- Be patient with victims. At first, many victims will deny their involvement. However, with continued support and encouragement, the child victim usually will divulge and discuss the victimization.

- Avoid duplicative interviews when possible. Multiple interviewers and interviews tend to confuse and intimidate children, especially younger ones, and may revictimize the child and produce inconsistent victim statements. Joint or taped interviews minimize the number of interviews required and maintain consistent phrasing of questions.

- If the victim is from another jurisdiction, work with victim witness staff in that community to ensure that victim services are provided.

- Do not show surprise or shock. Remember, the youth is probably already feeling guilt, shame, or embarrassment about what occurred.

- Be honest with the child about what he or she can expect from the investigation and prosecution of the case and about any future contact he or she may have with the perpetrator.

- Talk to the child victim about a victim impact statement and restitution if the case will be prosecuted and if it is developmentally appropriate. Regardless of the child's age, find ways to give him or her a sense of control over the situation—provide choices, no matter how small, and help him or her prepare for the court process. Consider requesting a guardian ad litem to represent and support the child throughout the legal process. Make the child familiar with the courtroom environment. A properly prepared child may find active involvement in the case empowering.

For the Family

- Internet crimes against children impact the entire family. Family members may feel guilty for not protecting their child more effectively. They also may feel anger or shame about their child's involvement in the crime. Family members are secondary victims and need to be offered support and information to help them understand the nature of these crimes and know how to better handle their often conflicting feelings.

- Assist families victimized by Internet crime who require travel and lodging arrangements related to the legal proceedings, such as depositions and hearings.

- Prepare the family for media and press coverage. Be sensitive to the privacy needs of the victim and family. Will the victim's name appear in any public documents? If so, can these documents be sealed if the family so desires?

- Help the family understand what their child is experiencing so they can help the child and feel some sense of control over the situation.[7]

Notes

1. *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, July 8, 1999, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce.

2. CyberStats, Federation of American Scientists Web site, www.fas.org/cp/netstats.htm.

3. Magid, Lawrence, 1992, *Child Safety on the Information Highway* (pamphlet), National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

4. Finkelhor, David, Kimberly J. Mitchell, and Janis Wolak, 2000, *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children: Arlington, VA.

5. Ibid.

6. A traveler case is when an adult travels to meet and have sex with a youth he or she met on the Internet.

7. Turman, K.M., and K.L. Poyer, 1998, *Child Victims and Witnesses: A Handbook for Criminal Justice Professionals*, Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice: Washington, DC.

For Further Information

NCJRS Publications

The following publications are available to professionals who work with child victims and child witnesses. To obtain copies free of charge from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), call 1–800–851–3420 or log on to www.ncjrs.org.

A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety (pamphlet). 1998. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice. (See full text online at www.fbi.gov/library; also published in *Compiler* Vol. 19(1), Summer 1999, pp. 14–17.)

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Saywitz, Karen J., and Kathleen Coulborn Faller. *Interviewing Child Witnesses and Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Portable Guide). 1996. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

Turman, K.M., and K.L. Poyer. *Child Victims and Witnesses: A Handbook for Criminal Justice Professionals*. 1998. Washington, DC: Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice.

NCMEC Publications

To obtain free single copies of the following publications, call the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children at 1–800–THELOST (1–800–843–5678) or make your request online at www.missingkids.org. There may be a charge for additional copies.

A Guide for Internet Service Providers To Assist Law Enforcement in Combating Child Exploitation (Fact Sheet). 1998. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Guidelines intended to show how Internet service providers (ISPs) can assist law enforcement in reducing child victimization in cyberspace. (NCMEC order #58.)

Magid, Lawrence. *Teen Safety on the Information Highway* (pamphlet). 1998. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Safety tip for families whose teenagers use computer online services. (English version, NCMEC order #57. Spanish version, NCMEC order #59. First 50 copies free; each additional copy, 10¢.)

——. *Child Safety on the Information Highway* (pamphlet). 1992. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Safety tips for families whose elementary school-aged children use computer online services. (English version, NCMEC order #03. Spanish version, NCMEC order #06. First 50 copies free; each additional copy, 10¢.)

Cyberspace Strategy. 1998. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. An issue brief that sets forth NCMEC's strategy to keep children safe on the information highway.

CyberTipline: Your Resource for Reporting the Sexual Exploitation of Children. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (NCMEC order #13.)

Finkelhor, David, Kimberly J. Mitchell, and Janis Wolak. *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*. 2000. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (NCMEC order #62. First copy free; each additional copy, $3.)

Additional Reading

Armagh, Daniel. "A Safety Net for the Internet: Protecting Our Children." *Journal of Juvenile Justice* 5(1) 1998, pp. 9–15. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

Child Sexual Exploitation: Improving Investigations and Protecting Victims: A Blueprint for Action. 1995. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice.

National Crime Prevention Council. *Cybersafe Kids: A Parents' Guide* (pamphlet). 1999. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice. (Available online at www.ncpc.org/10adu12.htm.)

What's My Job in Court? An Answer and Activity Book for Kids Who Are Going to Court. 1998. Washington, DC: Victim Witness Assistance Unit, U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia, U.S. Department of Justice. Request copies of this book by calling 202–514–7130.

Whitcomb, D., and J. Eastin. *Joining Forces Against Child Sexual Exploitation: Models for a Multijurisdictional Team Approach*. 1998. Washington, DC: Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice.

Organizations

For more information, contact the following organizations:

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Phone: 1–800–627–6872 or 301–519–5500
E-mail for print publication orders: puborder@ncjrs.org
E-mail for questions: askovc@ncjrs.org

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)
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Fax: 703–274–2222
World Wide Web: www.missingkids.org

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