Research-Driven Policy Recommendations

The past two decades have witnessed a vast array of federal and state legislation aimed at sex offenders, along with increases in funding to support interdiction and apprehension of suspects, improvements in technology, and various management strategies. Given the rise in investigations and prosecutions and increases in sentences, including the costly civil commitment of some offenders, it is fiscally responsible for officials to be asking whether current investigative, prosecutorial, and management practices are resulting in increased safety for our children and if the increased funding is being spent wisely in reducing the risk to children from sexual exploitation. This Bulletin features information from a study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention that examined how middle school, high school, and college students use the Internet and their relative levels of computer literacy. This study also examined the use of computers by Internet Sex Offenders and Child Molesters. To assist the policy maker, this Bulletin highlights data and research-driven information that may help chart a path toward increased safety for children and more effective use of limited resources.
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computer literate.

to be much more Internet-savvy and
generation" of sex offenders is likely
incarcerated sex offenders, the "new
Internet. Thus, unlike most of the currently
Sex Offenders, have grown up with the
some of whom may be future Internet
age of 40 in our sample), the current
current sex offender population (average
roughly the past 10-15 years. Unlike the
networking systems, is a recent development,
adults, and to make active use of social-
communicate with children and other
access pornography, to contact and
Thus, the use of the Internet to

today did not come “of age” during the
A significant portion of the sex offenders
today did not come “of age” during the
growth and maturation of the Internet.
Thus, the use of the Internet to
access pornography, to contact and
communicate with children and other
adults, and to make active use of social-


data. Notably, these figures for both men
and women are quite low by
national standards.

• For men there was a high negative
correlation between overall pornography
viewing and drug use, especially use of
speed, hallucinogens, opium/heroin,
and benzodiazepins.

As all forms of pornography become
increasingly and readily accessible,
pornographic depictions that are presently
regarded as highly deviant or extreme may
become more normative and thus more
socially acceptable. In other words, what
we regard as “deviant” today, because
it is used and/or practiced by few people,
may become increasingly “normal” as
more people view it. This shift toward
“normalization” increases viewers,
which, in turn, increases normalization.
The net effect is to blur the boundary
between what is deviant, and indeed
what is criminal, and what is illegal but
socially acceptable.

Roughly 15% of the male college students
in our sample reporting use of different
types of more “deviant” pornography:
sadism (16%), sex with animals (14.5%),
urine & feces (16.5%), nude images of early
to mid-teens (14%), and rape (9%). We
would conclude, based on this, that the
incidence of highly deviant pornography
in the college student population is
roughly 15%.

College Student Highlights

Data collected from 1,284 college
students revealed

• Although a high proportion of the men
(89%) and women (53%) reported
viewing pornography, including
hard-core pornography (82% of the men
and 45% of the women), the proportion
of men viewing pornography was
consistently about twice that of
the women.

• Pornography involving images of early
to mid-teens was viewed by 14% of
the men and 4% of the women.

• A higher percent of men (13%) reported
being a victim of a non-sexual offense,
such as fighting, property damage, and
theft, in childhood, compared with 9% of
the women. Both groups reported being
a victim of a non-sexual offense when
older than 18, at a rate of 5%.

• 7% of the women reported being a victim
of a sexual offense between the ages of
13 and 17, compared with less than 1%
of the men. Similarly, more women (6%)
reported being the victim of a sexual
offense in adulthood than men (1%).
Notably, these figures for both men
and women are quite low by
national standards.

• For women, there was a high positive
correlation between overall pornography
viewing and drug use, especially use of
cocaine, hallucinogens, and
prescription drugs.

• In particular there was a high correlation
between watching pornography
depicting rape and problems with drugs,
notably cocaine, benzodiazepins, and
prescription drugs, among women.

• Significant differences in online behavior
between girls and boys. Girls reported
spending more time online instant
messaging (IM) and visiting websites;
Boys reported IM, playing games and
were almost three times as likely to seek
out pornography.

• Almost three-quarters of the boys (68%)
viewed pornography on the Internet,
compared to the quarter (25%) of
the girls.

• Boys were also more likely to receive
sexually explicit pictures than girls.
(31% vs 16%)

• The girls were more likely to be
sexually harassed online than the
boys (13% vs. 5%).

• The overwhelming majority of high
school students (88%) reported using
social-networking sites; girls had a
higher use rate than boys.
• A scale measuring delinquent and antisocial behavior in the High School students, beginning in childhood and persisting into adolescence, was used to predict 9 different Internet-related risky behaviors. This scale predicted with a high degree of accuracy for both boys and girls. In all cases, the more the antisocial behavior, the greater the likelihood of each of these risky Internet behaviors.

Technology Highlights

Data from the Internet Knowledge Test designed to ask specific questions related to Internet technology (e.g., what is an IP address, what IM stands for, what is an URL, etc.) revealed

• College students and offenders reported the highest level of Internet knowledge with high school students having the lowest level.

• Internet Sex Offenders scored higher on knowing about Computer Recovery, URL, Spoof (using a false IP address), JAVA (program language), and IE Firefox (type of browser) items. These questions suggest that Internet Sex Offenders have a higher level of general knowledge about the working of the Internet.

• When the offender group was broken down between incarcerated and community based offenders, the community offenders scored highest on only one question, knowledge of VOIP (Voice Over Internet Phone). VOIP is a semi-secure phone system with a very low cost of service that provides each user with anonymity.

The Demographic Perfect Storm:

(a) Dramatic changes in Internet-user demographics, including an ever-increasing number of tech-savvy younger children who have widespread exposure to and use of the Internet.

(b) Combined with an ever-increasing proportion of child molesters using the Internet as a vehicle for grooming potential victims, must be taken into consideration in effecting policy changes. These demographics will radically change the way the Internet is used by the next generation of Internet Sex Offenders, those who may be offense-prone, and those who are their potential victims. The perfect demographic storm is likely to bring to the Internet increasing numbers of sophisticated (Internet savvy) offenders and increasing numbers of younger and younger child users.

A new generation of young victims may be easier to exploit for several reasons, including:

• A general acceptance of lowered expectations of privacy;

• An increased willingness to engage in nudity and sexually oriented activity online;

• An increased willingness to share personal information online with those first met online;

• Many new ways to contact, communicate with, and track the movement of children, such as through smart phones, netbooks, interactive social networks, and gaming systems;

• Powerful communication and security tools available to non-technical users, significantly increasing the number of people capable of concealing misconduct, perpetrating crimes, and thwarting investigations.

Policy makers should also be aware of the continued lack of parental/guardian use of safety technology and lack of sophistication with respect to such technology. This study found there is a significant difference in how adults view children’s Internet use and how children are actually using the systems and technology. Significant numbers of families reported using no filtering, blocking, or log-capturing software. In instances in which software was used, the children reported that they were able to disable it. In addition, active supervision by parents and guardians of smartphone users and other mobile-communication tools continues to be limited. This reality is in sharp contrast with the perception that technology and software tools are adequate, without industry regulation, to insure Internet safety.

The advent of smart phones, social-networking sites, net computers, and extensive marketing of new communication and Internet technologies to those younger than 18 could make the next generation of offenders even younger. These easily foreseen "techno-demographic" changes over the coming years, merging ever-increasing technological sophistication with the ever-decreasing age of users, will pose significant challenges to law enforcement. In the past, law enforcement has focused primarily on adult criminality, secondarily on juvenile delinquency, and rarely on preteen offense-related behaviors. We already see a blurring of the boundary of normal child and adolescent behavior and illegal behavior (e.g., sexting). Over time, this "ambiguity" will only increase. Moreover, increased mobility, the use of systems like Wifi, and enhanced encryption will make the search and seizure of evidence much more difficult outside of undercover investigations. Such methods may no longer be the best way to identify and pursue the most dangerous offenders. Additionally, with the power of smart phones and mobile technology increasing exponentially, it may be possible to victimize children just as effectively using equipment that is no more noticeable or difficult to obtain than that used by a techno-phobic person.

Finally, most Internet Sex Offenders are not highly trained computer users. Rather it is the availability to offenders of sophisticated communication and privacy tools with easy user interfaces, such as social-networking systems; encryption software; easy-to-use anonymizers; and shredding programs that make offenders more dangerous on the Internet. Law enforcement should consider their resource allocation to reflect this inevitable reality.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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