

University of New Hampshire

University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Crimes Against Children Research Center

Research Institutes, Centers and Programs

2009

Trends in Arrests of "Online Predators".

Janis Wolak

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, Janis.Wolak@unh.edu

David Finkelhor

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, David.Finkelhor@unh.edu

Kimberly J. Mitchell

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/ccrc>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., and Mitchell, K. (2009). Trends in Arrests of Online Predators. Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Research Institutes, Centers and Programs at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Crimes Against Children Research Center by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

TRENDS IN ARRESTS OF “ONLINE PREDATORS”

How the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study was conducted

The N-JOV Study collected information from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about the prevalence of arrests for and characteristics of online sex crimes against minors during two 12 month periods: July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2001 (Wave 1) and calendar year 2006 (Wave 2).

For both Waves, we used a two-phase process of mail surveys followed by telephone interviews to collect data from a national sample of the same local, county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. First, we sent the mail surveys to a national sample of more than 2,500 agencies. These surveys asked if agencies had made arrests for online sex crimes against minors during the respective one-year timeframes. Then we conducted detailed telephone interviews with law enforcement investigators about a random sample of arrest cases reported in the mail surveys.

For the telephone interviews, we designed a sampling procedure that took into account the number of arrests reported by an agency, so that we would not unduly burden respondents in agencies with many cases. If an agency reported between one and three arrests for online sex crimes, we conducted follow-up interviews for every case. For agencies that reported more than three arrests, we conducted interviews for all cases that involved youth victims (victims who were located and contacted during the investigation), and sampled other arrest cases (i.e., crimes that solely involved undercover operations in which investigators posed online as minors, or child pornography possession and distribution). In some agencies, we could not find out which cases had youth victims, so we sampled from all arrest cases.

The final data set, weighted to account for sampling procedures and non-response, includes data from 1,663 completed case-level interviews, 612 from Wave 1 of the N-JOV Study and 1,051 from Wave 2. Having weighted data which is based on a representative sampling of law enforcement agencies and arrest cases allows us to estimate the incidence of arrests for specific types of crimes during the timeframes of Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the N-JOV Study.

The estimates described in this report are based on a subgroup of arrests that includes 726 unweighted case level interviews (Wave 1, n=129 for youth victim cases and n=124 for solicitations to undercover investigators; Wave 2, n=120 for youth victim cases and n=353 for solicitations to undercover investigators).

A full report on the methodology of the N-JOV Study is posted online at: http://unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/N-JOV2_methodology_report.pdf

Janis Wolak

David Finkelhor

Kimberly Mitchell

Publicity about “online predators”^{*} – sex offenders who use the Internet to meet juvenile victims – has raised considerable alarm about the extent to which Internet use may be putting children and adolescents at risk for sexual abuse and exploitation. Media stories and Internet safety messages have raised fears by describing violent offenders who use the Internet to prey on naïve children by tricking them into face-to-face meetings or tracking them down through information posted online. Law enforcement has mobilized on a number of fronts, setting up task forces to identify and prosecute online predators, developing undercover operations, and urging social networking sites to protect young users.

Unfortunately, however, reliable information on the scope and nature of the online predator problem remains scarce. Established criminal justice data collection systems do not gather detailed data on such crimes that could help inform public policy and education. To remedy this information vacuum, the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire conducted two waves of a

^{*} Sex offenders who use the Internet to seek underage victims have been widely characterized as “online predators.” We are using the expression “online predator” in this report because it has gained so much currency. At the same time, readers must recognize that the term “predator” can mischaracterize some offenders in this study by giving the impression that these are uniformly highly motivated, repetitive, and aggressive sex offenders. In reality, sex offenders who target juveniles are a diverse group that cannot be accurately characterized with one-dimensional labels.

longitudinal study, the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study. This research collected data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about crimes by online predators during two 12 month periods—July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2001 (Wave 1) and calendar year 2006 (Wave 2). This study is the only systematic research that examines the number of arrests of these offenders, the characteristics of their crimes, and the scope of related law enforcement activity.

KEY FINDINGS

In this first report incorporating data from Wave 2 of the N-JOV study, we examine the number of arrests of and nature of crimes committed by online predators including those who victimized youth and those who solicited undercover investigators posing online as youth.

Some key findings of the report are:

- Between 2000 and 2006, there was a 21% increase in arrests of offenders who solicited youth online for sex. During the same time, there was a 381% increase in arrests of offenders who solicited undercover investigators posing as youth.
- In 2006, of those arrested for soliciting online, 87% solicited undercover investigators and 13% solicited youth.
- During the same period that online predator arrests were increasing, overall sex offenses against children and adolescents were declining, as were overall arrests for such crimes.
- Arrests of online predators in 2006 constituted about 1% of all arrests for sex crimes committed against children and youth.
- During the interval between the two studies (2000 - 2006), the percentage of U.S. youth Internet users ages 12-17 increased from 73% to 93%.^{1,2}
- Although arrests of online predators are increasing, especially arrests for soliciting undercover law

enforcement, the facts do not suggest that the Internet is facilitating an epidemic of sex crimes against youth. Rather, increasing arrests for online predation probably reflect increasing rates of youth Internet use, a migration of crime from offline to online venues, and the growth of law enforcement activity against online crimes.

- The nature of crimes in which online predators used the Internet to meet and victimize youth changed little between 2000 and 2006, despite the advent of social networking sites. Victims were adolescents, not younger children. Most offenders were open about their sexual motives in their online communications with youth. Few crimes (5%) involved violence.
- There was no evidence that online predators were stalking or abducting unsuspecting victims based on information they posted at social networking sites.
- There was a significant increase in arrests of young adult offenders, ages 18 to 25.
- Few of those arrested for online predation were registered sex offenders (4%).

These findings point to several conclusions: First, law enforcement appears to be having success in investigating, arresting and prosecuting online predators, particularly by using undercover techniques. Second, based on the scope of and trend in arrests for online predation, it is premature to conclude that the Internet is an unusually dangerous environment. Nonetheless, continuing research is needed to assess and monitor the relative risk of Internet use in general and of specific contexts, such as social networking sites. Third, current prevention strategies and messages need to be revised to accurately reflect the nature of crimes committed by online predators.

FINDINGS

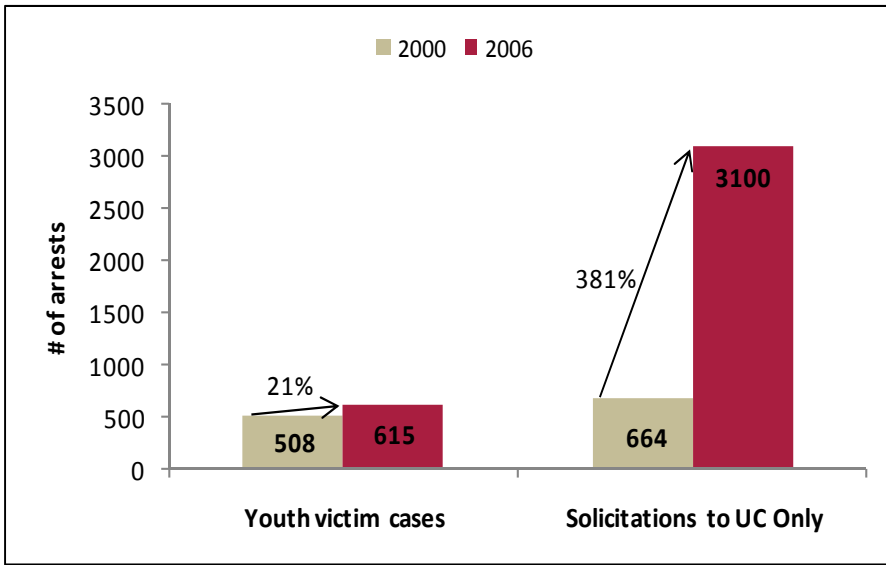
Arrests of online predators increased between 2000 and 2006. Most arrests and the majority of the increase involved offenders who solicited undercover investigators, not actual youth. We classified arrested online predators into two mutually exclusive categories according to whether their arrests were for: 1) “youth victim crimes” that involved youth victims ages 17 or younger or 2) “solicitations to undercover (UC) investigators” who were posing online as minors. Any offender whose crime involved a youth victim was put in the first category whether or not an undercover investigation was also involved.

Arrests for youth victim crimes. In 2006, law enforcement at all levels nationwide made an estimated 615 arrests (95% CI = 468 to 763) for crimes in which youth victims were solicited for sex by someone they met online (see Figure 1). This constituted an increase in arrests of 21% over 2000, when there were an estimated 508 such arrests (95% CI = 405 to 611).

Arrests for solicitations of UC investigators. In 2006, law enforcement made an estimated 3,100 arrests (95% CI = 2,277 to 3,923) for solicitations to UC investigators posing online as minors, compared to an estimated 644 such arrests (95% CI = 327 to 961) in 2000. This was a 381% increase.

These estimates of arrests are not full measures of the number of crimes committed by online predators or even the number of such crimes known to law enforcement. Many sex crimes against minors never come to the attention of law enforcement,^{3,4} and many of those known to law enforcement do not culminate in arrest.⁵ However, these estimates do provide a means to gauge the growth of these crimes, their number relative to other sex crimes against minors, and the extent of law enforcement activity

Figure 1. Online predator arrests increased nationwide from 2000 to 2006



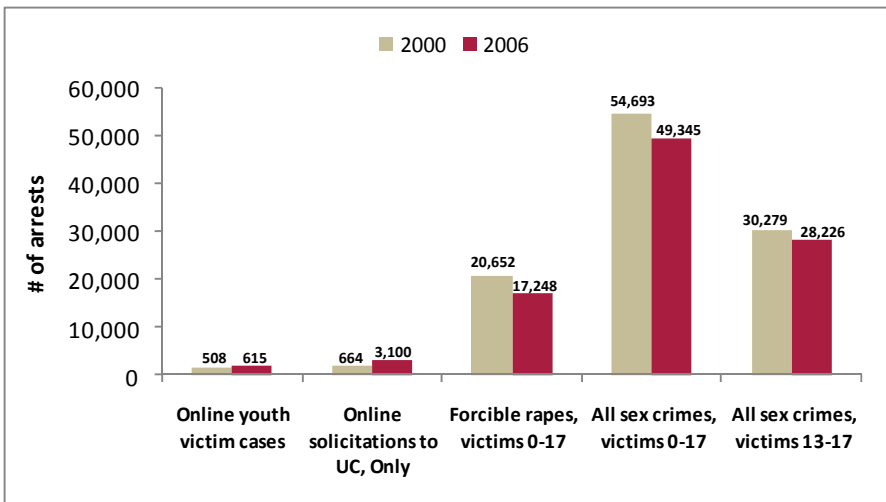
only a few years after the emergence of online predation as a public policy concern.

While there was an increase in arrests of offenders using the Internet to seek sex with minors, there was during the same period a decrease in reports of overall sex offenses against children and adolescents and a decrease in arrests for such crimes.

During the interval between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the N-JOV Study while arrests for online predation were increasing,

sex crimes against children (and sex crimes in general) were on the decline. These trends are apparent from multiple sources (see Figure 2). From 2000 to 2006, forcible rape arrests involving juvenile victims, estimated from the Uniform Crime Report, declined 16%. During the same time period, arrests for all sex offenses against juveniles estimated from the FBI NIBRS data collection system declined by 10%, with a decrease of 7% for the sub-group of victims who were ages 13 to 17.

Figure 2. Arrests for forcible rapes and other sex crimes with victims younger than 18 declined from 2000 to 2006



These trends were extensions of declines in sex crimes against minors underway since the early 1990s that have continued through 2006. The magnitude of these declines since the early 1990s has been quite large. For example, the number of sexual abuse cases substantiated by child protective authorities declined 52% between 1992 and 2005.⁶ Sexual assault rates as reported by teenagers to the National Crime Victimization Survey declined by 52% between 1993 and 2005.⁷ The fact that the evidence for declines in sexual abuse comes from victim self-report surveys as well as official child protective services and criminal justice system data tends to undermine the objection that these trends might be due simply to reduced reporting or changes in investigatory or statistical procedures.⁸ Other indicators reflective of real declines in sexual victimization rates have also improved. For example, the rate of pregnancy among teenagers declined 38% between 1990 and 2004,⁹ the percentage of teens engaging in sexual intercourse decreased and fewer children were running away from home.⁷ So while arrests of online predators increased, the larger overall sex crime problem against children appeared to have been abating.

The nature of crimes in which sex offenders used the Internet to meet and victimize youth changed little between 2000 and 2006, despite the advent of social networking sites.

Findings from Wave 1 of the N-JOV Study indicated that the stereotype of the online predator who used trickery and violence to stalk, abduct or assault young children was largely inaccurate.^{10,11} Most crimes by arrested online predators involved adolescent victims who knew they were communicating online with older adults who wanted sex. Most victims who met offenders face-to-face went to such meetings expecting to engage in sexual activity. Most offenders were charged with crimes such as statutory rape that

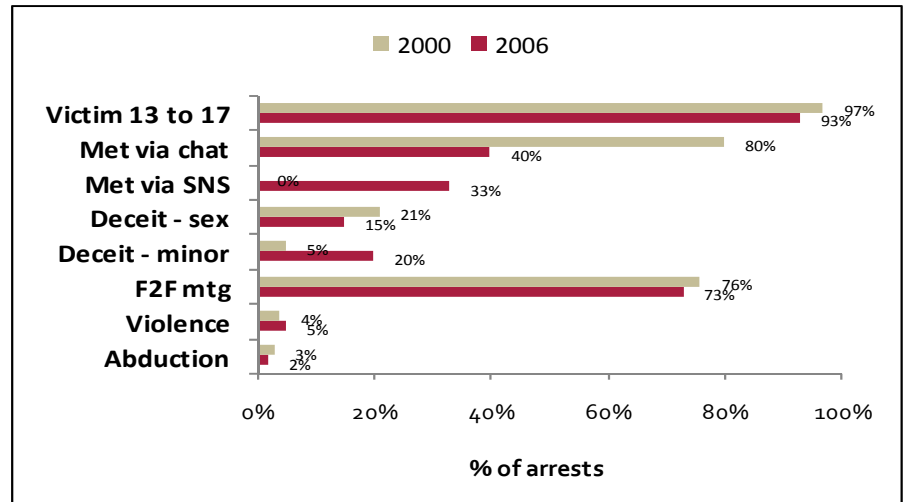
involved non-forcible sexual activity with victims who were too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults. Violence, stalking and abduction were rare. When offenders solicited undercover investigators, the case dynamics were consistent with this pattern as well.¹² While these crimes represented serious threats to the well-being of young people at the hands of unscrupulous adults, they differed from the image of online predation that many people have.

Despite these findings, the dynamics of crimes by online predators are still often misunderstood. For example, the widespread use of social networking sites by adolescents has led some to propose that sex offenders are commonly using information that youth post online at such sites to track down unsuspecting victims and stalk or abduct them.

Data from Wave 2 of the N-JOV Study suggest, however, that the nature of crimes by arrested online predators against youth victims changed little between 2000 and 2006 (see Figure 3). We found that in 2006 as in 2000, youth victims were young adolescents. Seventy-three percent were ages 13 to 15, similar to 2000 when 76%* of victims were in that age group. None were age 10 or younger. Most victims were girls, but boys were 16% of victims, compared to 25%* in 2000. In 2006, 85% of offenders were open about their sexual motives, compared to 79%* in 2000. Sexual violence against victims was rare, 5% of arrests in 2006 and 4% in 2000*. In 2006, 73% of cases with youth victims progressed from online contact to face-to-face meetings and illegal sexual activity, as did 76%* in 2000. In most cases the sex was illegal because the victims were too young to consent.

There were, however, several differences between online predation cases with youth victims that ended in arrest in 2006 compared to those in 2000.

Figure 3. The nature of crimes by arrested offenders against youth victims changed little between 2000 and 2008



- First, in 2000 80% of cases were initiated through contacts in chat-rooms, while this was true of only 40% of cases in 2006 ($p < .001$). By contrast, in 2006 33% of cases were initiated with contacts in victims' social networking sites. (Social networking sites were not being used by youth at Wave 1 of the N-JOV Study). However, this

Crimes by Online Predators: Case Examples

Case #1. Police in a West Coast state found child pornography in the possession of the 22-year-old offender. The offender, who was from a Northeastern state, confessed to befriending a 13-year-old local boy online, travelling to the West Coast, and meeting him for sex. Prior to the meeting, the offender and victim had corresponded online for about six months. The offender had sent the victim nude images via webcam and e-mail and they had called and texted each other hundreds of times. When they met for sex, the offender took graphic pictures of the encounter. The victim believed he was in love with the offender. He lived alone with his father and was struggling to fit in and come to terms with being gay. The offender possessed large quantities of child pornography that he had downloaded from the Internet. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Case #2. A 24-year-old man met a 14-year-old girl at a social networking site. He claimed to be 19. Their online conversation became romantic and sexual and the victim believed she was in love. They met several times for sex over a period of weeks. The offender took nude pictures of the victim and gave her alcohol and drugs. Her mother and stepfather found out and reported the crime to the police. The victim was lonely, had issues with drugs and alcohol, and problems at school and with her parents. She had posted provocative pictures of herself on her social networking site. She had met other men online and had sex with them. The offender was a suspect in another online enticement case. He was found guilty but had not been sentenced at time of the interview.

* This difference was not statistically significant.

difference did not appear to signal changes in case dynamics and probably simply reflected the shift of online social interaction from other Internet venues to social networking sites by 2006.¹³

- A second difference from 2000 was that in 2006 a greater proportion of the offenders claimed to be minors at some point during their online communications with victims, although this ploy was still a factor in only a minority of cases. In 2000, only 5% of cases involved offenders who lied by originally telling victims they were age 17 or younger. In 2006, this happened in 20% of cases ($p < .001$).
- Third, in 2006 fewer cases involved two or more face-to-face meetings between offenders and victims. In 2000, 54% of cases involved repeated meeting, but by 2006 that was true of only 39% ($p < .05$).
- Finally, in 2006 somewhat fewer cases involved offenders or victims who traveled more than 50 miles to a face-to-face meeting, 24% of cases compared to 37% in 2000 ($p < .05$).

There was no evidence that online predators were stalking or abducting unsuspecting victims based on information posted at social networking sites. Some have voiced fears that online predators would use information posted by youth at social networking sites to track down unknowing victims, stalk and abduct them, but we found no cases that reflected this scenario. We specifically asked about offline stalking and abduction in all Wave 2 youth victim cases. There were only three cases where the investigators we interviewed said offline stalking occurred, but all of these incidents happened after offenders and victims had already met face-to-face (see Inset). None involved violence, and it is not clear that any would have met legal definitions of stalking that require patterns of harassment or threatening behavior. Only one case

involved abduction, and it also did not match the stereotype of a stranger snatching an unsuspecting victim. In that case, the offender violated criminal abduction statutes when he took the victim somewhere against her will after, not prior, to a sexual assault

There was a significant increase in arrests of young adult offenders, ages 18 to 25.

Between 2000 and 2006, we found few changes in the characteristics of those arrested for online predation when we examined offenders' gender, race, criminal history and related problems such as substance abuse. This consistency was true for offenders against youth victims as well as

those who solicited undercover investigators (see Figure 4). In both waves of the N-JOV Study, virtually all offenders (99%) were male. Most were white, non-Hispanic although in 2006 a somewhat higher proportion of online predators came from minority groups (16% in 2006 compared to 10% in 2000, $p < .05$). This may reflect increased Internet access among minority racial and ethnic groups in 2006 compared to 2000.^{14,15} There was no change in the percentage of arrested offenders with substance abuse problems (15% in 2000, 14% in 2006*), histories of violence (9% in 2000, 5% in 2006*), or prior arrests for offenses that were not sexual (19% in 2000, 21% in 2006*). Curiously, the proportion of arrested offenders

Stalking Cases

Case #1. This 24-year-old offender and his 15-year-old victim had at least three face-to-face meetings over two or three years. The investigator said the stalking occurred late in the relationship when the offender "moved to [the city] where [the victim] lived even though she didn't want to continue the relationship."

Case #2. According to the police investigator, this offender, age 36, harassed or stalked the victim, age 14, by making "many unwelcome phone calls." However, the victim was described as being in love with the offender. She was in phone contact with him for months and continued phone contact after her mother tried to stop the relationship. The victim ran away from home to be with the offender, who hid her from police when he found out they were looking for her.

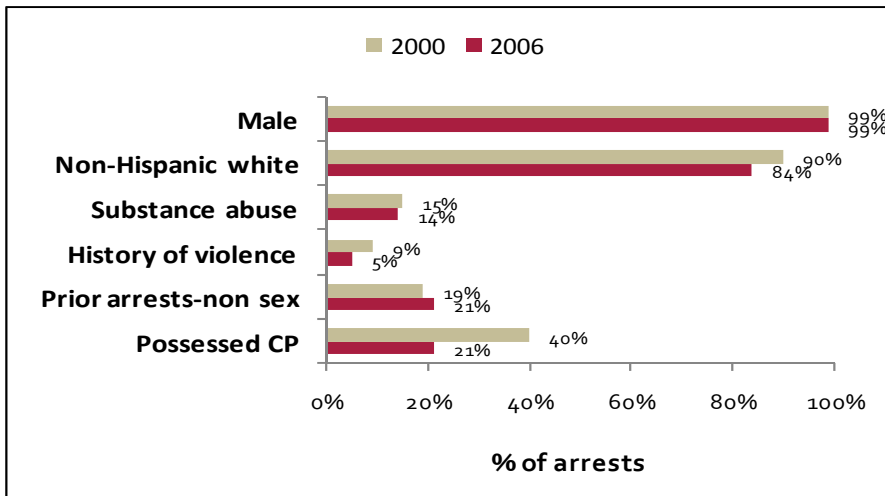
Case #3. The offender, age 41, and victim, age 13, met on a telephone chat line. They communicated via cell phone. They met face-to-face at least once for sex. Both claimed to be in love. The investigator said the offline harassment or stalking occurred when the offender "had a friend call [the victim's] house because he still loved her."

The Only Abduction Case

The victim, age 17, was raped by the offender when she went to his home to meet him. He was a 22 year old man she met online at a social networking site. After the rape, the victim wanted the offender to drive her back home. He refused and, instead, drove her to a nearby town where he planned to abandon her. The victim called 911 on her cell phone and told police the offender would not let her get out of his car. He was arrested and charged with sexual assault and kidnapping. The investigator said the offender was involved in sexual bondage and sadism.

* This difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 4. The characteristics of those arrested for online predation changed little between 2000 and 2006



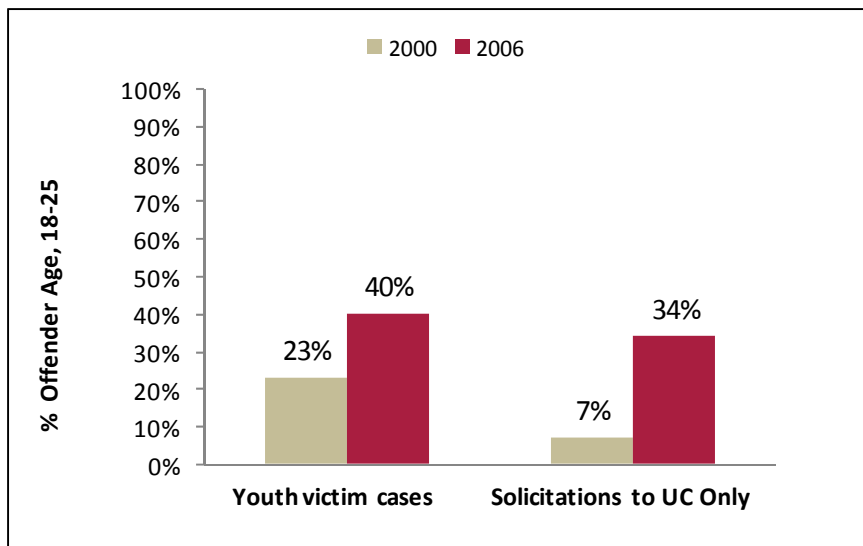
who possessed child pornography, however, decreased by almost half (40% in 2000, 21% in 2006, $p \leq .001$).

One potentially important change was that a larger percentage of those arrested for online predation in 2006 were young adults, ages 18 to 25 (see Figure 5). The percentage of offenders in that age range increased from 23% in 2000 to 40% in 2006 ($p < .05$), for cases with youth victims. In fact, for youth victim crimes, the overall increase in arrests in 2006 appeared to be entirely attributable to more arrests of young adult

offenders (ages 18 to 25). There was no increase in the estimated numbers of arrests of online predators in other age groups. The percentage of arrested offenders who solicited UC investigators also increased sharply among young adults, from 7% of arrests in 2000 to 34% in 2006 ($p < .0001$).

This increase in young adult offenders does not correspond to any overall increase in sex criminality within this age group suggested by other sources. It may be a consequence of

Figure 5. There were significant increases in arrests of young adult offenders, ages 18 to 25, from 2000 to 2006



the coming of age of the first cohort of youth to grow up with the Internet. Adults ages 18 to 25 may be more likely than older adults to use the Internet when engaging in deviant behavior.

Few of those arrested for online predation were registered sex offenders.

Of the online predators who were arrested for crimes against youth victims, 10% in 2006 and 9%* in 2000 had prior arrests for sex offenses against minors (see Figure 6). Only 4% of those arrested for crimes against youth victims in 2006 were registered sex offenders, as were only 2%* of those arrested in 2000. Among offenders arrested for soliciting UC investigators, 3% in 2006 and 4%* in 2000 had prior arrests for sex offenses against minors, and 2% of 2006 arrestees compared to 0%* of arrestees in 2000 were registered sex offenders.

While registration is one of the steps that the criminal justice system has taken to monitor convicted sex offenders and reduce re-offending, aiming strategies to prevent online predation at this population may have limited utility because so few online predators are registered sex offenders.

IMPLICATIONS

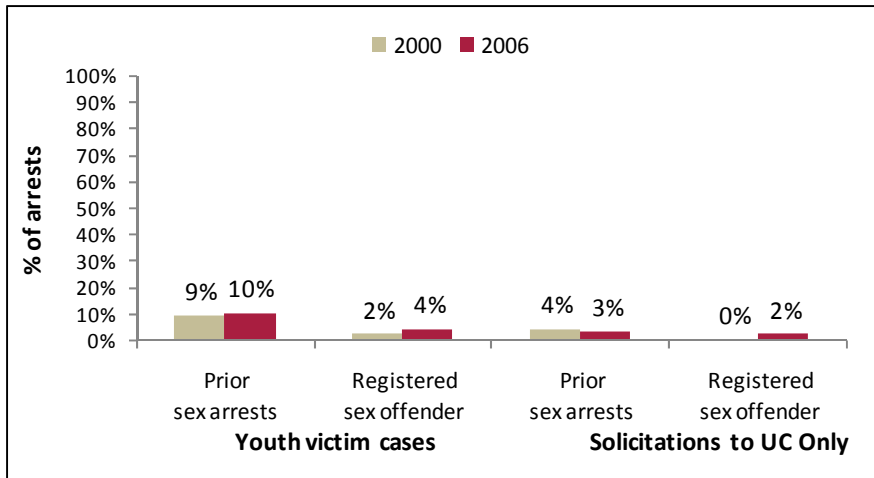
Why would arrests of online predators increase while arrests for overall sex crimes against children declined?

This report finds a large increase in arrests for sexual predation online at the same time that overall sex crimes against children have been declining. This may appear to be a paradox, but there are a number of ways to reconcile these contrasting trends.

First, as shown in Figure 2, arrests of online predators make up a relatively small proportion of arrests for sex crimes against children in general. The 615 arrests for youth victim crimes were about 1% of all arrests for nonforcible sex crimes against actual minors and 2%

* This difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 6. Few of those arrested for online predation were registered sex offenders



of arrests for nonforcible sex crimes committed against youth ages 13 to 17. Because online predation involves a new and relatively rare crime pattern, arrests could grow by large orders of magnitude and still not affect overall arrest rates by much. In spite of the media attention that online predators have received, it is important to bear in mind that in the larger context of sex crimes against children, offenders who victimize children and youth within their families or networks of acquaintances are much more common than those who use the Internet to meet victims.

Second, Internet use, as it grows to occupy more of social life in general, could simply be encompassing sex crimes that may have heretofore originated in other environments. Sex offenders may be substituting online for offline strategies, so that increases in cases where offenders meet victims online are balanced by decreases in cases in which they meet victims other ways. For example, sex offenders who before the widespread use of the Internet would have gone to places such as shopping malls, parks, and roller rinks to meet potential adolescent victims may now be using online arenas where youth congregate, such as chat rooms or social networking sites. Because of this displacement, online

crimes could be increasing even while total crimes fall.

Third, there has been an undeniably large expansion of law enforcement activity online. The number of agencies funded to pursue online child sexual exploitation crimes has increased, as has the number of trained law enforcement investigators. Between 2000 and 2006, the number of Internet Crimes against Children (ICAC) Regional Task Forces funded by the US Department of Justice grew from 30 to 46. By 2006, the ICAC Task Forces had formed partnerships with approximately 1,300 affiliate law enforcement agencies at the local, state, county and federal levels; and had a presence in all 50 states. Training programs for investigating Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes have been in place and growing since around 1999, so that increasing numbers of law enforcement personnel have been trained in investigating crimes by online predators. New reporting mechanisms have been put in place, such as the CyberTipline, operated by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. There was also increased public awareness brought about by television shows such as "To Catch a Predator" and news accounts of such online crimes.

Publicity about online predators may have led to citizens being more likely to recognize and report such cases. Such increases in law enforcement activity are generally associated with rising arrests, even when there is no underlying change or even a decline in underlying criminal activity.

Fourth, aggressive law enforcement activity related to online predation could actually be reducing overall sex crimes against minors. Arrests of offenders who solicited UC investigators saw the largest increase and constituted the largest proportion of arrests of online predators – an estimated 3,100 arrests in 2006. Arrests of these offenders, some of whom may be at early stages in their offending careers,¹² may be preventing the victimization of some youth.

Law enforcement authorities report that it is easy to locate sexually predatory behavior toward youth online. Some law enforcement officials have suggested they could easily increase numbers of arrests even further. But the discovery that the Internet provides a ready window on sex criminality does not mean necessarily that Internet use by sex offenders has increased the overall quantity of sexual predation of children. Nonetheless, the possibility that Internet use is fueling sex crimes against children at present or could do so in the future does need to be taken seriously. The ongoing trends and risks to children need to be carefully monitored.

Signs of law enforcement success.

After six years of considerable law enforcement mobilization in response to online predators between 2000 and 2006, there has been a marked increase in arrests of those who would try to use the Internet to recruit minors for sexual activity. Most of these arrests have occurred through the use of undercover decoys posing online as young adolescents. Our earlier evaluation of this law enforcement activity suggested that overall this was being carried out

responsibly by specially trained officers in multi-agency operations, and that it had resulted in conviction rates as high as or higher than other sex crime investigations.¹² Given the overall declines in sex crimes against minors and in the absence of evidence that police authority is being abused, we are inclined to see this as a sign of a successful initiative to deploy law enforcement in a domain where criminal sexual activities may be migrating, as well as the successful adaptation of new technology to improve police effectiveness.

These findings do not suggest that the Internet is more dangerous than other environments that children and adolescents frequent.

The findings here should emphatically NOT be interpreted to suggest that the Internet is a dangerous environment for children or youth or that the Internet is ridden with sex crimes or becoming more dangerous. The levels of arrests of online predators revealed in this study are quite small compared to total arrests for sex crimes as evidenced by national crime data. Moreover, the growing number of arrests of online predators is best interpreted as a product of the increasing range of the Internet and the increasing aggressiveness of law enforcement activity online. To judge how comparatively dangerous Internet use is we need community studies of young people that assess the full range of sexual victimizations they suffer and determine what characteristics and activities are associated with increased risk. However, the studies of child sexual abuse and exploitation that have been conducted to date suggest that it is not being online or even being visible to strangers online that puts young people at risk. When Internet use puts them in danger, it appears to involve specific high risk activities like talking online about sex with unknown people.^{16,17} Moreover, the greatest exposure of children and adolescents to sex crimes is at the hands of people who are already a part of their families and social networks.^{18,19} More risk assess-

ment studies are needed because there is a great deal that remains to be understood about Internet use and its impact on youth safety. Nonetheless, the fact that overall sex crime rates have been declining during the time that Internet use has expanded to virtually the entire adolescent population is reassuring.

Social networking sites are not necessarily dangerous environments.

We found that, in 2006, 33% of crimes with youth victims involved initial contact between arrested offenders and victims that occurred at victims' social networking sites. This may reinforce recent concerns that social networking sites are risky environments. But findings like those of this study do not mean that social networking sites are necessarily dangerous or promoting sex crimes. When a medium becomes used by a huge portion of the population – in 2006 55% of youth ages 12 to 17 used social networking sites,¹³ an estimated 14 million youth based on census numbers (numbers for adult users were not available) – it inevitably becomes a venue for deviant activity by some, but it is not necessarily a risk-promoter. As indicated earlier, studies are needed about specific activities and environments of young people that are associated with risk. But so far studies have not shown that simply using a social networking site is risky in the absence of other behaviors such as responding to sexual overtures made via such sites.^{20,21*} The fact that some online predation involved the use of social networking sites may simply reflect the broad use of such sites as a communication and interaction tool in current society.

Revising prevention strategies.

The findings of the N-JOV study reiterate conclusions from earlier studies that the dynamics of crimes by online predators differ from how such crimes are often conceived by the public and characterized in much Internet safety

education.¹¹ The reality, evidenced from 249 interviews about specific arrest cases with youth victims conducted with police investigators in the two waves of this research, is that the victims of online predators are almost exclusively teenagers who go knowingly to meet men whom they know to be considerably older and interested in sex. Most of these victims are drawn into relationships with offenders after extended online exchanges and because they are looking for romance, sexual adventure or validation. There is little stalking, deception, violence, abduction or forcible rape. Online predators commit serious sex crimes and take advantage of vulnerable youth, but effective prevention strategies need to describe how these crimes actually come about if their occurrence is to be prevented or short-circuited; otherwise, the adolescents involved may not recognize these events as crimes.

For example, we think that more efforts need to be made to educate and discourage teens from engaging in sexual and romantic relationships with older partners. Youth awareness also needs to be raised about age of consent and statutory rape laws, the illegality of cross generational sexual solicitation online, the inadvisability of teens engaging in sexual conversations and exchanging sexual or provocative images with strangers and presenting themselves in sexualized descriptions online. These sorts of messages are more likely to address the real dynamics of the crime than warnings about being stalked by someone who obtains personal information posted online.

Beyond registered sex offenders.

Some recent Internet safety debates have dwelt on restricting online access for registered sex offenders. The current study found that only 4% of online predators arrested for crimes against

* It should also be noted that social networking sites have implemented a number of new safety initiatives since 2006.

youth victims were registered sex offenders, as were 2% of those arrested for soliciting undercover investigators. Thus, it is important for the public and officials to know that policies targeted at registered sex offenders are aimed at a very small part of the problem. Internet safety needs to be designed with the assumption that most online predators are not registered offenders and have no prior record. Thus, other mechanisms for deterring this behavior need to be designed.

Pursuit of conventional child molesters.

The broader statistical picture revealed by the N-JOV Study is that, despite increases, crimes by online predators are still a small percentage of total sex crimes committed against children and adolescents. Thus, public policy should be careful not to abandon or underfund the investigation of conventional child molestation. Using the Internet to seek out sex offenders who solicit investigators posing online as minors has a clear value, as well as an appeal to law enforcement, which is utilizing technology and sophisticated undercover techniques regarding a crime of considerable public concern. But conventional child molestation – abusive fathers, neighbors, teachers and family friends – still constitutes a much larger part of the problem than online predation. There is every reason for law enforcement to continue to mount aggressive efforts to combat sexual abuse of children both on- and offline.

More research is needed.

The discussions about online predators reveal an enormous need for additional information. What sites and what activities put young people at risk? What kinds of online protections and education can help protect youth? How do online predators compare to offline sex offenders in their risk to reoffend? There is much that we still do not know, and because the Internet is a new and rapidly changing environment the need for current information is particularly acute. People are keen to act to protect

children, but misguided action based on mistaken assumptions may waste time and resources, and it may even undermine the current and future effectiveness of protection efforts. We need a sound, regularly updated research agenda to inform evidence-based education and prevention programs geared toward promoting child and adolescent safety as the Internet and other communication technologies continue to evolve and proliferate.

REFERENCES

1. Macgill AR. Parent and teenager Internet use. Washington, DC: PEW/Internet; October 24 2007.
2. Lenhart A, Rainie L, Lewis O. Teenage life online: The rise of the instant-message generation and the Internet's impact on friendships and family relationships. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project; 2001.
3. Finkelhor D, Ormrod RK. Characteristics of crimes against juveniles. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. 2000(June):1-11.
4. Kilpatrick DG, Saunders BE, Smith DW. *Youth victimization: Prevalence and implications*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice; 2003.
5. Finkelhor D, Cross TP, Cantor EN. The justice system for juvenile victims: A comprehensive model of case flow. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*. 2005; 6(2):83-102.
6. Finkelhor D, Jones L. Good news: Child victimization has been declining. Why? In: Finkelhor D, ed. *Child victimization: Violence, crimes, and abuse in the lives of young people*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2008:122-147.
7. Finkelhor D, Jones L. Why have child maltreatment and child victimization declined? *Journal of Social Issues*. 2006; 62(4):685-716.
8. Finkelhor D, Jones LM. Explanations for the decline in child sexual abuse cases. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. 2004(January):1-12.
9. National Center for Health Statistics. NCHS Data on teenage pregnancy: Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/info sheets/infosheet_teen_preg.htm Updated September 2008. Accessed February 18, 2009.
10. Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K. Internet-initiated sex crimes against minors: Implications for prevention based on findings from a national study. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*. 2004; 35(5):424.e411-420.
11. Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K, Ybarra M. Online "predators" and their victims: Myths, realities and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*. 2008; 63(2):111-128.
12. Mitchell KJ, Wolak J, Finkelhor D. Police posing as juveniles online to catch sex offenders: Is it working? *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. 2005; 17(3):241-267.
13. Lenhart A, Madden M. *Social networking websites and teens: An overview*. Washington, D.C.: PEW Internet & American Life Project; January 3 2007.
14. Fox S, Livingston G. *Latinos online: Hispanics with lower levels of education and English proficiency remain largely disconnected from the Internet*. Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, DC; 2007.
15. Lenhart A, Rainie L, Fox S, Horrigan J, Spooner T. *Who's not online: 57% of those without Internet access say they do not plan to log on*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project; 2000.
16. Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K. Is talking online to unknown people always risky? Distinguishing online interaction styles in a national sample of youth Internet users. *CyberP*

psychology & Behavior. 2008; 11(3):340-343.

17. Ybarra ML, Mitchell KJ, Finkelhor D, Wolak J. Internet prevention messages: Targeting the right online behaviors. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. 2007; 161(2):138-145.
18. Finkelhor D, Hammer H, Sedlak A. Sexually assaulted children: National estimates and characteristics. *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention*; August 2008.
19. Finkelhor D, Ormrod R, Turner H, Hamby SL. The victimization of children and youth: A comprehensive, national survey. *Child Maltreatment*. 2005; 10(1):207-207.
20. Mitchell K, Wolak J, Finkelhor D. Are blogs putting youths at risk for online sexual solicitation or harassment? *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2007; 32:277-294.
21. Ybarra ML, Mitchell KJ. How risky are social networking sites? A comparison of places online where youth sexual solicitation and harassment occurs. *Pediatrics*. 2008; 121(2):350-357.
22. Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Mitchell K, Ybarra M. Online "predators" and their victims: Myths, realities and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*. 2008; 63(2):111-128.

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through Grant Numbers 2005-JL-FX-0048 and 2006-JP-FX-0061 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice in the amount of \$695,482. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice. Some of Janis Wolak's effort was supported by a fellowship from the Verizon Foundation. We are grateful to the many law enforcement investigators who participated in this research and to the talents, perseverance, and interviewing skills of research assistants Dianne Ramey, Elisabeth Cloyd, Brynn Dunne, Rick Dumont, Tonya Prescott, and Kaitlin Lounsbury. Thanks to Kelly Foster and Toby Ball for help in the production of the bulletin.

Figure Notes

The estimates in Figures 1, 4, 5 & 6 are based on 726 unweighted case level interviews (Wave 1 YR 2000, n=129 for youth victim cases and n=124 for solicitations to UC only; Wave 2 YR 2006, n=120 for youth victim cases and n=353 for solicitations to UC only).

In Figure 2, arrests for forcible rapes with victims ages 0 to 17 are estimated from the Uniform Crime Report. Arrests for all sex crimes with victims ages 0 to 17 and the subgroup of victims 13 to 17 are estimated from the National Incident-Based Reporting System. Based on these numbers, arrests for forcible rapes of juvenile victims decreased by 16% between 2000 and 2006; arrests for all sex crimes against juveniles decreased by 10%; arrests for all sex crimes against teenage victims decreased by 7%. Arrests for solicitations to UC investigators increased 381%; arrests for online predation against youth victims increased 21%.

Figure 3 estimates are based on 249 unweighted case level interviews (Wave 1 YR 2000, n=129; Wave 2 YR 2006, n=120). "SNS" social networking site; "Deceit – sex" the offender was deceitful about sexual motives; "Deceit – minor" the offender claimed to be a minor; "F2F mtg" the offender and victim met face-to-face.

In Figure 4, "al" alcohol, "CP" child pornography, "Prior arrests-not sex" prior arrests for crimes that were not sex offenses.



CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN RESEARCH CENTER

126 Horton Social Science Center
Durham, NH 03824

(603) 862-1888
(603) 862-1122 FAX

www.unh.edu/ccrc

