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Lori Wright
UNH Media Relations

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National Study Finds Large Increase In Arrests Of Online Predators In Undercover Operations

Media Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

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EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Janis Wolak, senior researcher and co-director of the National Juvenile Online Victimization Studies; and David Finkelhor, director of the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center, are available to discuss the report findings. Wolak can be reached at 603-862-4691 and janis.wolak@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. -- A new study finds dramatic growth nationwide in arrests of online predators who solicited law enforcement investigators decoyed as juveniles. The numbers nearly quintupled from 644 in 2000 to 3,100 in 2006, according to the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

During the same period, arrests of individuals for soliciting juveniles themselves grew a comparatively modest 21 percent, from an estimated 508 arrests in 2000 to an estimated 615 in 2006, at a time when youth Internet use was growing from 73 percent to 93 percent.

The report, "Trends in Arrests of 'Online Predators'," cautions against parents and policy makers rushing to conclude that the increasing numbers of arrests means the Internet is an especially dangerous environment for children.

"Online predator arrests comprise only 1 percent of arrests for sex crimes committed against minors. The recent growth in arrests is best explained by increasing numbers of youth online, migration of crime from offline to online venues and the intensification of law enforcement activity against online crimes," said Janis Wolak, co-director of the study with CCRC senior researcher Kimberly Mitchell.

The growth in arrests coincided with a large expansion of federally funded Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces, revisions of state statutes to criminalize online sexual solicitations, the promotion of reporting mechanisms such as the CyberTipline run by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, and greater public awareness about the problem.

The report points out that the increases in arrests of online predators occurred during a time when overall sex crimes against children were declining, as indicated by national arrest, police report and survey data.

The report findings are based on the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study conducted by the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center and funded by the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Researchers 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, and calendar year 2006. The 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

- Between 2000 and 2006, there was a 21 percent increase in arrests of offenders who solicited youth online for sex. During the same time, there was a 381 percent increase in arrests of offenders who solicited undercover investigators posing as youth.
- In 2006 of those arrested for soliciting online, 87 percent solicited undercover investigators and 13 percent 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 percent of all arrests for sex crimes committed against children and youth.
- During the interval between the two studies (2000 and 2006), the percentage of U.S. youth Internet users ages 12-17 increased from 73 percent to 93 percent.
- 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 percent) 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 percent).

The study was conducted by UNH Crimes against Children Research Center: Janis Wolak, senior researcher; David Finkelhor, director and professor of sociology; and Kimberly Mitchell, senior researcher. The report is available at <http://www.unh.edu/news/NJOV2.pdf>.

The UNH Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) works to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, and other child welfare practitioners. CCRC is concerned with research about the nature of crimes including child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, and physical and sexual abuse as well as their impact. Visit the center online at <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html>.

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