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UNH Child Abuse Expert Testifies Before Congress About Myths And Realities Of Online Sex Crimes

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DURHAM, N.H. – The public myth about Internet sex crimes holds that pedophiles are lurking online looking to victimize young children. This differs markedly from the reality that most victims are teenagers who are curious about sex and are seduced by someone who appeals to their desire for understanding and romance.

On Tuesday, July 24, 2007, David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, testified about the myths and realities of online sex crimes at a hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in Washington, D.C.

“The public impression about this crime is that we have ‘Internet pedophiles,’ who have moved from the playgrounds into your living room through the Internet connection, who target young children by pretending to be other children, who lie about their ages, identities and motives, who trick the children into providing personal information like their names and addresses, or who harvest it from MySpace. And then armed with this information, these criminals stalk the children, abduct them and rape them or worse,” Finkelhor testified.

“But our research suggests a different reality. We have found that the predominant online sex crime victims are not young children, but rather teenagers. These are criminal seductions that take advantage of common teenage vulnerabilities,” he testified. “The offenders lure teens to meet them for sexual encounters after weeks of explicit online conversations that play on the teen’s desires for romance, adventure, sexual information and understanding. These teens are often troubled youth with histories of family turmoil and physical and sexual abuse.”

According to Finkelhor, in 73 percent of these crimes, the youth meet the offender on multiple occasions, for multiple sexual encounters. Half the victims were described by police as being in love with or feeling close friendship with the offender. In a quarter of the cases the victim ran away from home to be with the offender.

Teenagers become vulnerable to online sex crimes when they talk about sex online with strangers and have a pattern of multiple risky activities on the web — going to sex sites and chat rooms, and interacting with lots of people there.

“To prevent these crimes, we have to take on more awkward and complicated topics that start with an acceptance of the fact that some teens are curious about sex and looking for romance and adventure. We need to educate them about why hooking up with a 32-year-old has major drawbacks like jail, bad press and public embarrassment, and why they should be discouraging, not patronizing, sites and people who are doing offensive things online, fascinating as they may seem,” Finkelhor testified.

