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Erika Mantz

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Contact: Erika Mantz
603-862-1567
UNH Media Relations

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Law enforcement in the United States is having notable success in its effort to combat Internet-related sex crimes against children, according to a University of New Hampshire study.

The study, "Internet Sex Crimes against Minors: The Response of Law Enforcement," points to more than 2,500 yearly arrests for such crimes, extensive cooperation among local, state and federal agencies, and the effective use of undercover sting operations as some indicators of success. In addition, prosecutions of these Internet-related crimes appear to be more successful than prosecutions for other child sex crimes.

The research was conducted by UNH's Crimes against Children Research Center and researchers Janis Wolak, David Finkelhor and Kim Mitchell, with funding from the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

The study found law enforcement pursuing Internet sex crime in a variety of ways. More than 40 percent of arrested offenders were involved in criminal relationships with actual children, which were mostly reported to law enforcement by victims, their families and other citizens. A quarter of the arrests came from undercover operations in which agents, posing as minors on the Internet, were themselves solicited for sexual acts. Another third of the arrests were of offenders who had not solicited victims, but had used the Internet to download and trade child pornography. These criminal activities were of a generally serious nature. For example, 83 percent of arrested offenders who possessed child pornography had sexual images of children between the ages of 6 and 12, and 80 percent had images that explicitly depicted the sexual penetration of minors.

The study was based on a national survey of law enforcement agencies and more than 600 interviews with criminal investigators.

The research highlighted the complex nature of the challenges posed by Internet sex crimes against minors. Because offenders often reside far from their victims and violate both state and federal law, most of the investigations involved agencies in multiple jurisdictions, and in half, a federal agency as well, such as the FBI or the U.S. postal inspection service.

In spite of this complexity, the report found that 95 percent of the state and 93 percent of the federal prosecutions led to convictions. The report attributed some of this success to the
extensive electronic evidence that frequently exists when crimes involve the Internet.

The report urged continued training for law enforcement in the techniques for combating Internet sex crimes, with particular emphasis on methods for multijurisdictional co-operation.