



Online child sexual exploitation: An investigative analysis of offender characteristics and offending behavior



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ABSTRACT

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) III – Crimes Against Children analyzed 251 resolved FBI online child sexual exploitation investigations which included possessing, distributing, or producing child pornography, traveling to have sex with a minor, and/or contact offending against a child(ren). Analysis revealed that the all male convenience sample was predominately Caucasian with relative diversity in age, occupation, and marital status. The majority did not have a prior criminal arrest history. In addition many offenders exhibited a pattern of behavior involving both child pornography material and/or contact offending indicative of their sexual preference for children. The co-occurrence of offending behaviors among this sample is consistent with the characteristics of the preferential child sex offender, a sub-type of an investigative model initially developed by the FBI in the early 1980s. The authors highlight the motivations and behaviors among individuals who sexually abuse children, and how distinctions can impact the investigations and prosecutions of these types of offenders.

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1. Introduction

The sexual abuse of children has existed through history, and so too has the production of erotic literature and drawings involving children.¹ Beginning with the invention of the camera in the nineteenth century, sexualized images involving children began to be produced, traded, and collected (Tate, 1990; Tyler, 1985). However, access to child pornography² was rather restricted as images were often produced locally, of poor quality, expensive, and/or difficult to obtain (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Unlike in the past where a degree of determination and skill was needed to locate and obtain it, today the Internet³ has provided new ways for offenders to access children and child pornography (Sheldon & Howitt, 2007). It has also increased the amount of material available, the efficiency of its distribution, and the ease and anonymity of its accessibility (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006).

Beginning in the 1990s, child sex crimes investigations required law enforcement and the criminal justice system to address criminal activity not anticipated in statutes, become technically trained, develop new investigative techniques, and become more involved in multi-jurisdictional cases (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). As a

result, child exploitation offenses, such as child pornography, became a fast-growing segment of the federal criminal caseload in the United States (Byrne, Lurigio, & Pimentel, 2009; Motivans & Kyckelhan, 2007). Along with the increased number of defendants charged with sex crimes, the types of sex crimes that are federally prosecuted have also expanded (Byrne et al., 2009; Motivans & Kyckelhan, 2007). For example, in 1994, sexual abuse or contact sexual offenses comprised 74% of all sexual exploitation cases in the U.S. Federal Criminal Justice System. By 2006, sexual contact offenses constituted only 16% (Motivans & Kyckelhan, 2007). During that same period, child pornography cases increased from 22% in 1994 to 69% in 2006 (Motivans & Kyckelhan, 2007). This increase is likely due to the dramatic increase in law enforcement's response in working these cases and the overall improvement of investigative techniques targeting these offenders. In addition, a variety of federal agencies (e.g., Federal Bureau of Investigation, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, United States Postal Inspection, and international police organizations) have contributed significant resources to these investigations, often working in multi-agency task forces.

2. Literature review

As Internet use has become more common, questions have emerged about how sexual offenders are using the Internet to commit crimes involving child exploitation and child pornography (Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Lanning, 2010; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2005; Taylor & Quayle, 2003). Researchers have greatly increased our understanding of the criminal behavior and the demographics of child sex offenders.

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¹ The term "child(ren)" refers to minors under the age of 18 years.

² For the purposes of the paper and the study, child pornography is defined as a visual depiction portraying any child (younger than 18 years of age) engaging in sexually explicit conduct (e.g., lascivious exhibition of genitals) (18 U.S.C. §2256).

³ For the purposes of this paper, the term "Internet" is broadly defined to include any type of online activity.

The most well-known and established model used by law enforcement and criminal justice professionals is the *Child Sex Offender Continuum*, developed by the FBI's BAU in the early 1980s (Dietz, 1983; Lanning, 1986, 2010). Initially the model, comprised of descriptive labels used for investigative and prosecutive purposes only, divided child sex offenders into two categories of *Situational* or *Preferential* (Dietz, 1983; Lanning, 1986, 2010). Although not diagnostic, the model has progressed into a continuum and allows consideration for a variety of motives and behavior while still incorporating the predominant needs of an offender (Lanning, 2010).

On one end of the continuum are the situational-type sex offenders. The motivation of their sexual offending is usually centered on basic sexual desires (lust) or nonsexual needs (power, anger). They may make careless mistakes in their sexual offending because they act impulsively to opportunities that present themselves. Some studies have found that situational offenders prefer adult partners, start offending later in life, have fewer victims, offend when stressed, and often offend against family members (Abel, Mittleman, & Becker, 1985; Ward, Loudon, & Hudson, 1995). As a result, they are also less selective of their victim's physical characteristics and choose their victims based on availability and opportunity. If a situational-type sex offender's victims are children, they molest for a variety of reasons which are not reflective of their true sexual preference. Situational-type offenders frequently lack effective social and verbal skills, and children may be chosen because they are more readily available and easier to control and manipulate. Their pornography collections, if they have one, do not reflect a true sexual preference for children and are instead representative of their own unique sexual arousal (Lanning, 2010).

At the other end of the continuum are preferential-type sex offenders. Their sexual interest in children is persistent and their sexual behavior is often described as obsessive and primarily fantasy driven. Some preferential sex offenders may be pedophiles,⁴ but typologies were created in order to avoid and limit the use of this diagnostic term. Preferential-type offenders, with effective verbal and social abilities, often engage in a grooming process with their victims, which they use to increase a victim's cooperation and decrease the potential for disclosure (Hoffer, Muirhead, Owens, & Shelton, 2015; Lanning, 2010). They are more likely to collect and be aroused by child pornography with specific themes (Hazelwood & Warren, 2009; Lanning, 2010). Some have suggested that child pornography offenses are a strong diagnostic indicator of pedophilia than contact offending against a child (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006). In one study, offenders who collected child pornography, regardless of whether or not they had contact offenses, were significantly more likely to be identified as showing a pedophilic pattern of sexual interest in children than the combined group of contact offenders (Seto et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, an exclusive preference for children of a particular age is not essential for an offender to be described as a preferential offender (Lanning, 2010). They can also be diverse in their sexual interests, having a variety of sexual preferences, including children. For instance, preferential offenders may engage in sex with adult partners and/or collect adult pornography, but children remain an important component of their sexual arousal patterns and erotic imagery. Still, some preferential offenders experience difficulties in their sexual relationships with adults, but engage in this behavior in order to gain or maintain access to children (Lanning, 2010).

More recent developments in technology have required studies to apply established theories and models of child sex offending to those offenders who also utilize technology in furtherance of their crimes

⁴ Pedophilia is a diagnostic term and can only be diagnosed by a qualified psychologist or psychiatrist. Increased awareness of child sexual abuse has resulted in more frequent use of the term in society, however, its diagnostic definition is quite precise (Lanning, 2010). It requires an individual to have fantasies, urges or behaviors that are recurrent, intense, and sexually arousing, cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning, and involve prepubescent children, generally, age 13 or younger (DSM-IV-TR).

(Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Lanning, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2005; Seto, 2004; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007). A 2011 meta-analysis of 27 online child sex offender studies found that they were more likely to be Caucasian, male, younger, never married, and unemployed as compared with the general population (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011). In addition, online child sex offenders across a variety of samples consistently showed higher rates of sexual deviancy. Contrary to anecdotal experiences of law enforcement (Hoffer & Isom, 2015; Lanning, 2010), the meta-analysis reported lower rates of cognitive distortions, impression management, and emotional identification with children, as compared to offline⁵ sex offenders (Babchishin et al., 2011). There were also no significant differences found between online and offline child sex offenders in terms of loneliness or self-esteem and no dissimilarities in education level when comparing online offenders to a normative population.

The finding that younger and unemployed individuals make up the majority of online child sex offenders is not surprising given these two variables have previously been identified as risk factors for online sexual offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). However, the predominance of Caucasian males in online sex offender studies has yet to be definitively explained. There is relatively little research on the association among race and sexual offenses, but one potential explanation for this is the racial distribution of Internet use in the general population, which reflects that over 75% of users are Caucasian, similar to the racial distribution in the U.S. Census (Babchishin et al., 2011; Rainie, 2010).

The lack of marital history among online child sex offenders could be the result of their avoidance of emotional closeness in sexual relationships with adults or deficits in social skills or intimacy (Schmitt, Shackelford, & Buss, 2001). Research has established that child sex offenders, particularly pedophiles, have an inclination for cognitive and emotional affiliations with children, labeled by Finkelhor (1984) as *emotional congruence*. Their identification with children, psychological immaturity, and the substantial time spent with children limits opportunities for similar age peer interactions/relationships. In addition, the Internet's anonymity and lack of face-to-face communication may be preferred by some offenders as it reduces the hazards of social interaction, can assist in rationalization of behaviors, and normalizes what would otherwise be considered taboo activities (Durkin & Bryant, 1999; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Quayle & Taylor, 2002). This avoidance may result in offenders using pictures in sexual activities in order to avoid people and thus, less likely to be in romantic relationships with consenting adults (Babchishin et al., 2011). It has also been proposed that this lack of interest in companionship and intimacy is why some online child sex offenders do not act on their sexually deviant interest in children (Babchishin et al., 2011).

The 2011 meta-analysis also highlighted one fundamental question among the studies – how different or similar are online child sex offenders from offline child sex offenders (Babchishin et al., 2011)? More recently, there have been discussions about the validity of previous assumptions which have characterized Internet offenders as those who restrict their behavior to online criminality (“Expert Interview with Dr. Mike Bourke”, 2013). Various typologies have been discussed in the literature proposing that online offenders are of a distinct type (Babchishin et al., 2011). These typologies of online offenders include individuals who (1) access child pornography impulsively or out of curiosity, but do not have a specific interest in children; (2) view child pornography to satisfy sexual fantasies, but do not commit child contact sex offenses; (3) produce and distribute child pornography solely for financial gain; and (4) use the Internet to facilitate contact sex offenses against children (Lanning, 2010).

⁵ Offline offenders were defined as predominantly child molesters but included some offenders with adult victims. In addition, their analyses was limited to comparisons among mixed offenders, since the online group would be expected to have a proportion of offenders with offline offenses and vice versa (Babchishin et al., 2011).

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