



Original article

Are Crimes by Online Predators Different From Crimes by Sex Offenders Who Know Youth In-Person?

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: We examined cases in which sex offenders arrested for Internet-related crimes used the Internet for sexual communications with minors, comparing crimes by offenders who met victims online to those by offenders who knew victims in-person prior to the offense.

Methods: We collected data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies ($n = 2,653$) about arrests in 2009 for Internet-related sex crimes against minors, conducting detailed telephone interviews with investigators about individual cases. This paper examines a subset of arrest cases that included the use of online sexual communications (online-meeting offenders, $n = 143$; know-in-person/online offenders, $n = 139$).

Results and Conclusions: Compared with know-in-person/online offenders, online-meeting offenders were less likely to have criminal backgrounds and more likely to use online communications to deceive victims. However, deception was a factor in a minority of cases and was also used by some know-in-person/online offenders. The majority of cases in both groups involved statutory rape (i.e., nonforcible illegal sexual activity with underage youth) or noncontact offenses such as child pornography production or sexual solicitation of a minor. We conclude that crimes by online-meeting offenders should not be treated as different or more dangerous than those by know-in-person/online offenders who use online sexual communications. Rather, prevention efforts should educate about the nature of statutory rape and related noncontact offenses. The primary message should be that it is criminal for adults to make sexual overtures to minors, online or offline, no matter what their relationship to the youth.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

We challenge the view that “online predators” are distinctly dangerous sex offenders requiring specific programs to protect youth. When online sexual communication is involved, their crimes are highly similar to statutory rape by offenders whom victims know in-person. Comprehensive prevention programs addressing statutory rape would protect young people more effectively.

The threat of online predators targeting young adolescents for sex crimes has been the focus of more than a decade of media reports, research, and prevention efforts. These crimes by offenders who use the Internet to meet young victims, or “online-meeting” offenders, are often portrayed as singularly fiendish incidents in which sex offenders target children in online venues

(e.g., social networking sites, gaming sites, chat rooms) and use deceptive online communications to seduce or manipulate victims into situations where they will comply with offenders’ sexual demands [1–3]. These online seductions and manipulations include acts such as introducing talk of sex, showing a victim pornography, or asking a victim to perform sexual acts, with the intention that the victim’s sexual arousal will overcome inhibitions about engaging in sexual activity [4]. Some see crimes by online-meeting offenders as uniquely endangering children and teens, asserting that the anonymity of online communications has a “disinhibiting” effect, which causes naïve children and teens to be drawn into risky sexual interactions that they would normally avoid [2,5,6]. Internet safety materials and research studies often

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describe this potential hazard of online communications as a key danger of sexual approaches by online-meeting offenders [2,7,8].

This notion of online-meeting offenders as dangerous, deceitful predators who use distinctive tactics has become part of the public discourse, despite research that shows most crimes by such offenders do not involve violence or deception and are not unique [9,10]. Most online-meeting offenders target adolescents and perpetrate nonforcible crimes involving illegal sexual contact with youth who are too young to consent to sexual activity (i.e., statutory rape). Offenders often use promises of love and romance to seduce victims or target adolescents who are looking for sexual experiences. However, this type of sex crime is not new, despite the use of online technologies to meet and communicate with victims. Violations of age-of-consent laws constitute as much as one quarter of reports of sex crimes against minors [11], although crimes by online-meeting offenders appear to comprise only a small percentage of statutory rape offenses [9,12]. Moreover, this focus on online-meeting offenders may overshadow the reality that most perpetrators of nonforcible sex crimes against children and adolescents do not meet victims online; they know them in-person prior to the offense [13].

Further, seducing or manipulating victims by introducing sexual content into interactions is not a novel sex offender strategy. It is a common tactic of sex offenders who are in-person acquaintances or victims. Sometimes called “grooming,” it was described in the literature before online communications existed [4,14,15], largely to explain how offenders who know victims in-person gain their trust and then abuse them, as seen in the cases of sports figures, youth workers, and priests, which have gotten considerable attention lately.

At the same time, there is evidence that such “know-in-person” offenders are increasingly using online communications to interact with victims. Among those individuals arrested for Internet-related sexual offenses in 2009, there were far more know-in-person offenders who victimized youth than there were online-meeting offenders who did (estimated 2,164 vs. 844, respectively) [12]. Despite the fact that rates of child sexual abuse have declined substantially since the mid-1990s [16–18], arrests for Internet-related sex crimes by know-in-person offenders more than doubled in 2009 compared to 2006, when there were an estimated 877 arrests [12]. These know-in-person offenders used technology in a variety of ways, including for online sexual communications with victims that involved talk of sex (e.g., questions about victims’ sexual experience, offers to educate victims about sex), sending nude images or pornography, urging victims to masturbate or soliciting sexual images from victims [19].

This paper takes up the question of whether crimes by arrested online-meeting offenders involving online sexual communications with victims were different from or more dangerous than those by offenders who knew victims in-person and used similar tactics. The question of differences is important because considerable effort and expense have gone into creating educational programs to prevent crimes by online-meeting offenders [20]. If data show that they or their crimes do not have substantially different or unusual characteristics, it would make sense to stop treating online-meeting offenders as a special category of sex offender requiring distinct prevention efforts. Young people may be better served by programs that focus on preventing sexual victimization from a broader range of offenders that includes those youth know in-person.

We address this question with data collected from a national sample of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies about

arrests for Internet-related sex crimes in 2009. This paper examines a subset of cases that included online sexual communications with victims (online-meeting offenders, $n = 143$, know-in-person/online offenders, $n = 139$). We use the term “know-in-person/online offenders” to emphasize these are a subset of know-in-person offenders, who used online sexual communications. We ask: Among those arrested for sex crimes against minors that included online sexual communications, were online-meeting offenders different or more dangerous than know-in-person/online offenders in terms of personal characteristics? Did online-meeting offenders target a different group of victims? Did they use different strategies to commit sex crimes or commit more dangerous offenses?

Methods

We surveyed a stratified national sample of 2,653 law enforcement agencies by mail asking if they had made arrests for Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes during 2009. Then we conducted detailed telephone interviews with investigators about specific cases reported in the mail surveys.

Sample

The data were collected as part of the Third National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV-3) Study. A three-frame stratified sample of agencies was used because Internet-related cases do not occur with equal probability among the more than 15,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies. The first frame included agencies mandated to investigate Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes ($n = 176$); first frame agencies were sampled with certainty. The second frame consisted of agencies with staff trained in Internet-related child sexual exploitation cases ($n = 1,636$), about half of which were randomly selected to participate in the study ($n = 815$). The third frame consisted of all other local, county, and state law enforcement agencies in the United States ($n = 13,572$), identified from an annually updated national directory of law enforcement agencies; about 12% were randomly selected for the sample ($n = 1,662$).

Procedures

We sent mail surveys to the heads of agencies with cover letters explaining the research. Reminder postcards and two follow-up mailings were sent to nonresponding agencies; then we called or faxed nonresponders to obtain completed surveys. The mail survey response rate was 86%.

When agencies reported relevant arrests, the survey asked for contact information for the primary investigator. Trained interviewers then contacted investigators to schedule interviews. Interviewers used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system to gather details about reported cases and they prepared narrative summaries of each case. The telephone interview response rate was 64%. Data were collected between March 2010 and March 2011. Table 1 provides more details about the sample disposition. Study procedures were approved by the University of New Hampshire Human Subjects Review Board.

Measures

The mail survey asked: “Between **January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2009**, did your agency make ANY ARRESTS in cases

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