



Review article

The Prevalence of Unwanted Online Sexual Exposure and Solicitation Among Youth: A Meta-Analysis

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The objective of this meta-analysis was to provide a synthesis of studies examining the prevalence of unwanted online exposure and solicitation of a sexual nature among youth, and to determine if prevalence varies by youth age, gender, year of study data collection, or study geographical location.

Method: Eligible studies from January 1990 to January 2016 were identified utilizing a comprehensive search strategy. Included studies examined the prevalence of unwanted online exposure and solicitation in youth who ranged from 12 to 16.5 years. Two independent coders extracted all relevant data. Random-effects meta-analyses were used to derive mean prevalence rates.

Results: Thirty-one (37,649 participants) and nine (18,272 participants) samples were included in the syntheses on unwanted online sexual exposure and solicitation, respectively. For online exposure, the mean prevalence rate was 20.3% (95% confidence interval: 17.1–23.4). For online solicitation, the mean prevalence rate was 11.5% (95% confidence interval: 9.4–13.6). Moderator analyses indicated that prevalence rates for unwanted online exposure and solicitation have decreased over time. Prevalence varied as a function of gender (solicitations were higher for males), but not age or geographical location.

Conclusions: Approximately one in five youth experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material and one in nine youth experience online sexual solicitation. Educational campaigns to raise awareness of Internet risks and safety strategies are warranted.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

Study findings indicate that one in five youth experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, and one in nine youth experience unwanted online solicitation of a sexual nature. This synthesis underscores the ongoing need for educational campaigns to draw attention to Internet risks. It also underscores the need for additional research on the psychological impact of Internet-facilitated sexual encounters.

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In 2015, over 80% of American youth had access to home computers and the Internet [1]. Moreover, children aged 5–16 spend on average 6.5 hours per day on computers, tablets, smartphones, and/or videogame consoles, a number that has doubled over the last two decades [2]. With increased screen time comes concurrent growth in Internet and social media use and exposure [3]. Thus, computers and other electronic devices that facilitate Internet access are a central component of young people's lives [4]. The Internet provides a hub of information, and has the potential to be highly beneficial to youth in terms of greater access to learning opportunities, valuable resources, and positive social interactions with peers. However, the Internet remains a relatively new and mostly unregulated entity, which in turn can place youth at risk of experiencing some of its potential dangers, including unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit pictures or videos, as well as unwanted online solicitation (i.e., requests by a peer or adult to engage in *unwanted* sexual activities or sexual talk online) [5,6].

Youth generally have lower socio-cognitive sophistication compared to adults [7–9]. Thus, they may have less capacity to foresee the potential threats posed by the Internet, which can make them vulnerable to unsolicited and potentially disturbing online content. Studies have demonstrated that these encounters can be psychologically distressing, with 25% of youth reporting that they were considerably distressed or afraid as a result of online solicitation [10]. Thus, while not all youth report online sexual encounters to be traumatizing, a proportion are negatively impacted by these events. As noted by Livingstone and Smith [11], a naiveté regarding these encounters may exist and their impact may be exacerbated by other online use and behavioral characteristics (e.g., high Internet use and talks with strangers online) [12], as well as offline behavioral characteristics (e.g., loneliness, anxiety, and depression) [13]. These complexities highlight the importance of attaining prevalence estimates of unwanted online sexual exposure and solicitation as an important foundation for further understanding risk factors for, as well as consequences of, these potential victimizations.

Formal reports and investigations of Internet-related sexual exposure and solicitation of youth have increased over time [6]. Nationwide campaigns for greater parent and youth education concerning Internet safety behaviors have also emerged [14–16]. The prevalence of unwanted online exposure and solicitation, however, remains unclear, as rates in the extant literature range considerably. For unwanted exposure to sexually explicit material, prevalence rates range from 2% to 70% [17,18]; and for unwanted sexual solicitation, the range is from 2% to 24% [19,20]. This substantial variability can create difficulty in understanding the exact risk posed to youth on the Internet. Reported prevalence rates as high as 70% can also create unnecessary and unwarranted alarm in the public domain. By combining studies via a meta-analysis and deriving a precise estimate across the full body of research, the degree of risk can be derived. This, in turn, will assist in disseminating accurate information to children, adolescents, parents, and helping professionals via educational platforms regarding Internet safety.

Several demographic and methodological factors may account for variability in the reported prevalence of unwanted sexual exposure and solicitation. Although adolescents are cognitively better equipped than preadolescents to implement Internet safety strategies [21–23], their daily Internet use is greater [24], and they are more likely to navigate sites such as chat rooms that may increase their risk of experiencing unwanted online exposure and solicitation [10,25]. Moreover, adolescents, more so than children, own and use mobile smartphones as a way of connecting to the

Internet, with 24% of adolescents reporting that they feel “constantly connected” to the Internet [26]. As youth progress through adolescence and their interest and participation in sexual activities increase [27], they may visit sites with more sexual content, thereby increasing their risk to unwanted exposure and solicitation [28,29]. Additionally, parents may allow adolescents greater online freedom with less monitoring and supervision [30]. For all these reasons, it is expected that as adolescents age, their risk of experiencing unwanted online exposure or solicitation may increase. Gender may also play a role in understanding variability in prevalence, as some studies have found that girls are more likely to be solicited, compared to boys [10]. Finally, conditions for exposure across the globe may vary due to differential access to the Internet, societal norms regarding sexual behavior, and/or government controls. Thus, we also examine geographical location as a potential moderator of between-study variability [31].

It is also important to elucidate whether the degree of risk has increased, decreased, or remained constant over time. The potential dangers of the Internet have been repeatedly highlighted in mainstream media, and warranted or not, concerns about its perils have seized the attention of parents, teachers, health practitioners, child welfare, police, and policy makers, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court [32–36]. This increased attention and focus may in turn result in decreases in the prevalence of unwanted online exposure and solicitation among youth [19].

Meta-analyses are the best method in clinical science for resolving discrepancies in the literature, and for testing under which conditions effect sizes are particularly strong or weak (i.e., moderator analyses). Thus, the goals of the current study are to: (1) attain a mean estimate of the prevalence of both unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material and solicitation via a meta-analytic synthesis of the literature amassed to date; and (2) examine potential moderators that may amplify or attenuate prevalence rates, including youth age and gender, as well as year of data collection, and geographical location.

Methods

Definitional criteria

There is a notable absence of gold standard definitional criteria in research investigating online encounters of a sexual nature among youth. The current study adopted the definitional elements provided by researchers at the Crimes Against Children Research Center [32], who define *unwanted* online exposure as exposure to sexually explicit pictures and/or videos via pop-up windows, spam e-mails, Web site links, etc., without seeking or expecting sexual material. We also include *accidental* exposure under this umbrella term as both unwanted and accidental imply youth intent was lacking and unplanned. Online solicitation is defined as requests to engage in *unwanted* sexual activities or sexual talk, or to provide sexual information [4] to another individual (including peers and adults). All studies included in the current meta-analysis assessed experiences of *unwanted and/or unsolicited* online exposure and solicitation that were consistent with these operational criteria, though definitional precision varied across studies (see Table 1).

Search strategy

This meta-analysis was based on recommendations and standards set by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (<http://www.prismstatement.org>) [37]. A

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