Chapter 4: Internet-Facilitated Sexual Offending

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Introduction

There is increasing public and professional concern about Internet-facilitated sexual offending, reflected in a greater number of prosecutions and clinical referrals for these crimes (Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Motivans & Kyckelhahn, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Internet sexual offending comprises a range of crimes, including possession or distribution of child pornography; production of child pornography; sexual solicitations[1] (online interactions with minors for sexual purposes, including plans to meet offline); and conspiracy crimes (e.g., collaborating with others to distribute or produce child pornography or to solicit minors). The large majority of online offenses involve possession or distribution of child pornography.

It is hard to obtain precise estimates of Internet sexual offending in the United States, as there is no national system for integrating information about Internet offenders at the state level and there are state-by-state variations in the applicable laws. However, the National Juvenile Online Victimization Study, conducted in 2000 and again in 2009, indicates that the number of arrests in the United States for Internet sex crimes has tripled over that time (Wolak, 2012; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011). Average sentences are getting longer for comparable child pornography offenses, indicating that Internet offenders will occupy custodial beds longer and will require longer terms of supervision if they become eligible for probation/parole (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009).

Given the nature of the Internet, this type of sexual offending is clearly an international problem, with political, legal, and geographic complexities. Many child pornography sites are based outside the United States (e.g., Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia), where laws differ substantially. The International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (2010) reviewed laws in 196 countries and found that almost half (89 countries) did not have specific child pornography laws. Some of the remaining countries prohibited child pornography under more general obscenity laws, but some countries had no legal prohibitions. There is also variation in prohibitions of child pornography; for example, some countries (such as the United States) prohibit only visual depictions of real children, whereas other countries (such as Canada) prohibit depictions of fictional children (e.g., anime) or nonvisual depictions (e.g., audio recordings or stories).

The increase in Internet sexual offending has been paralleled by a decrease in the number of reported child sexual abuse cases, and a decrease in violent crime more broadly (Mishra & Lalumière, 2009; Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). This indicates that Internet sexual offending is a new phenomenon that may not be influenced by the same contextual factors as other kinds of sexual or violent crime. An important research question is the extent to which Internet sex offenders represent a new type of sex offender, or whether they reflect the transformation of conventional sexual offending through the adoption of new technologies (Seto & Hanson, 2011).

Whatever the explanations for this increasing demand, it is clear that the number of potential Internet offending investigations already greatly exceeds law enforcement resources. For example, two programs (Fairplay and Roundup) have identified millions of computers involved in peer-to-peer sharing of child pornography files in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Many law enforcement agencies are still dealing with a backlog of cases arising from Operation Avalanche (an investigation that began after the discovery of Landslide Productions in Texas and its large database of members purchasing access to child pornography Web sites) and other, more recent international police operations that have identified very large numbers of online offending suspects. Although more resources are being devoted to peer-to-peer investigations, many police investigators continue to conduct proactive, undercover investigations—in which they pretend to be a minor online—in anticipation of solicitation attempts by adults (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2005; Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011). Although resources for law enforcement in this area are increasing, the reality is that only some cases will be fully investigated and prosecuted.

Prioritization of Cases

Faced with more cases than they can handle in a timely fashion, law enforcement and other professionals who deal with these offenders need to prioritize their resources. But how should they assign priority? Given an overarching goal to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, it makes sense to prioritize and triage child pornography cases involving production or high-level distribution over possession alone or "passive" distribution (e.g., uploading images to file-sharing programs but not actively trading with others); solicitation cases involving attempts to meet in real life over online fantasy activities (e.g., sexually explicit chat); and cases involving Internet offenders who have already sexually assaulted children or are currently doing so over those with no known contact

FINDINGS

The different types of Internet-facilitated crime are—

  Possession, distribution, and production of child pornography.

  Sexual solicitation.

  Conspiracy crimes.

The characteristics of Internet offenders are—

  One in eight had an official record for contact sexual offending.

  Fifty-five percent admitted to a history of contact sexual offending.

  Offenders were relatively low risk compared to contact sex offenders.

  Child pornography offenders are likely to be pedophiles.

  Solicitation offenders are primarily interested in adolescent girls.

offending history. High-priority cases, in which children are suspected to already be victims or are at imminent risk, should receive the most attention. The scientific and practical challenge is determining how investigators can distinguish, with relatively limited initial evidence, which cases are more likely to involve production, solicitation of minors, and/or contact offending.

Summary of Research Findings

Offender Motivations

Sexual Interest in Children

Many, but not all, Internet offenders are motivated by a sexual interest in children. This has been demonstrated in a recent study showing that the majority of Canadian child pornography offenders assessed at a sexual behavior clinic showed more sexual arousal (assessed through penile plethysmography responses in the laboratory) to children than to adults, and in fact show a stronger relative response than do offenders with contact victims (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006). As well, one-third to one-half of child pornography offenders interviewed by police or by clinicians admitted they were sexually interested in children or in child pornography content (e.g., Seto, Reeves, & Jung, 2010). Other studies have also demonstrated a link between sexual interest in children and child pornography use through self-report surveys (e.g., Buschman et al., 2010; Riegel, 2004).

These results are consistent with what we know about the modal child pornography image seized by police, which depicts young girls who appear to be younger than age 12 and often depicts children in sexually explicit conduct (Collins, 2012; Quayle & Jones, 2011). It is a reasonable assumption that individuals will seek out pornography content that reflects their sexual interests (Seto, Maric, & Barbaree, 2001). Thus, pedophilic individuals will tend to seek out content depicting young children, while nonpedophilic individuals who are involved with child pornography will tend to seek out content depicting underage adolescents. The relationship between child pornography offending and pedophilia is sufficiently robust that child pornography use has been included as specific behavioral evidence in the proposed revision of the psychiatric diagnostic criteria for pedophilia, defined clinically as "persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Seto, 2010).

However, pedophilia is not the sole motivation for Internet offending involving children; that is, not all child pornography offenders show a sexual preference for children over adults. The offenders in Seto, Reeves, and Jung (2010) gave other explanations for their child pornography offending, including indiscriminate sexual interests, an "addiction" to pornography, and curiosity (see also Merdian et al., 2013). These explanations are based on self-report alone and should be interpreted cautiously because offenders may have offered alternative explanations (other than pedophilia) for their crimes in response to the stigma associated with the pedophilia label.

Sexual Interest in Adolescents

In addition, research by the Crimes against Children Research Center suggests that solicitation offenders target young adolescents, typically between ages 13 and 15, which would not be consistent with the clinical diagnosis of pedophilia (because many of the adolescents involved would be showing some signs of sexual and physical maturation) (Wolak et al., 2008). Although it is illegal and is a contravention of social norms about sexual behavior, a sexual interest in young to mid-teen adolescents is not indicative of pedophilia.

Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) have suggested that there is a distinction between fantasy-driven and contact-driven solicitation offenders. The former group engages in online activities (such as sexual chat, exchange of pornographic images, or exhibitionism via Webcam) that are gratifying

"Solicitation offenders primarily target young adolescent females."

in and of themselves, often resulting in orgasm while online. These activities appear to reflect the sexual fantasies of the offenders and likely fuel those same fantasies by providing experiences and images for future occasions. Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) suggest that this fantasy-driven group is not interested in or likely to commit contact sexual offenses against children. The latter group, in contrast, engages in online activities to arrange real-world meetings; their online activity is more directed toward meeting offline and shorter in duration than the online interactions of fantasy-driven offenders. Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) identified 30 offenders who were considered to be contact driven and 21 who were deemed to be fantasy driven. Given the small sample size and exploratory nature of this study, more research is needed to determine if this distinction between solicitation offenders is valid and meaningful.

For cases resulting in actual meetings between an adult and a minor, sexual contact typically occurred on multiple occasions (Wolak et al., 2008). Use of threat or physical force was rare (4–5 percent of cases). Wolak and colleagues (2008) concluded that solicitation offenders may have more in common with statutory sex offenders—who have sexual contacts with minors who agree to the interactions but are below the legally defined age of consent—than they do with pedophilic offenders, who target prepubescent children or seek child pornography depicting prepubescent children. It is rare for solicitation offenders to target young children, stalk or abduct unsuspecting minors, or use physical coercion or force to engage in sex with minors. However, only cases involving contacts with real minors that were subsequently reported to police were included in this research. It is possible that unreported cases, or cases involving online contacts but no real-world meetings, do involve younger children and/or more violent behavior.

Krueger, Kaplan, and First (2009) compared 22 solicitation offenders and 38 child pornography-only offenders. Although this study was limited because of the small sample size, there were no significant group differences in the prevalence of paraphilia diagnoses, anxiety or mood disorder diagnoses, or substance abuse disorder diagnoses. As one might expect given the nature of their offenses, solicitation offenders were more likely to be identified as having a hypersexuality disorder (a proposed psychiatric diagnosis for individuals with an excessive interest or involvement in sexual behavior) in terms of

excessive online sexual activity, whereas child pornography-only offenders were more likely to be identified as having a hypersexuality disorder in terms of dependence on pornography.

Seto and colleagues (2012) compared 70 solicitation offenders to 38 child pornography offenders and 38 contact sex offenders on demographic variables; self-reported and self-rated sexual deviance; dynamic risk factors assessed using the Stable-2007; and risk estimated on two modified actuarial risk measures, the Static-99 and the VASOR (Seto et al., 2012). (For a discussion of adult "Sex Offender Risk Assessment," see chapter 6 in the Adult section.) They found that solicitation offenders were similar or lower in potential risk to reoffend than child pornography offenders, with fewer men in the former group disclosing undetected sexual offenses, fewer admitting sexual interest in prepubescent or pubescent children, and lower scores on ratings of sexual deviance. This was surprising because most of the solicitation offenders had actually attempted to meet with someone they thought was a minor (usually an undercover police officer), whereas child pornography offenders might never have approached a minor directly.

Contact Offending History

In a recent meta-analysis, Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin (2011) reviewed available studies and identified 21 samples of Internet offenders (a total of 4,464 mostly child pornography offenders, although some samples also included solicitation offenders)

> *"One in eight Internet offenders has a history of contact sexual offending in their official criminal records."*

with information about their contact offending histories.[2] On average, one in eight online offenders had an official criminal record for contact sexual offending. In the six samples with self-report data, a little more than half (55 percent) admitted to a history of contact sexual offending,[3] usually as a result of clinical involvement and/or polygraph examination.

Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin's (2011) meta-analysis produced several important findings:

> *"More than half of Internet offenders self-reported a history of contact sexual offending."*

- Many Internet offenders have no known prior contact offending history (identifying a major gap in the literature, as the established risk measures that are available for contact sex offenders may not apply to the Internet population.

- There is a sizable difference between undetected and detected offenses, when comparing the self-report prevalence rates with the official record rates.

- Though some of the offenders who deny any history of contact offending may be lying, despite being in treatment or undergoing a polygraph examination, it does not appear that most or all Internet offenders have committed a contact sexual offense. (For more on treatment, see chapter 7, "Effectiveness of Treatment for Adult Sex Offenders," in the Adult section.)

Buschman and Bogaerts (2009) noted that polygraph examination can increase disclosures not only of prior contact sexual offenses but also of sexual interest in young children, including admissions of masturbating to sexual fantasies of children and seeking opportunities to have sexual contacts with children.

Further research is needed to identify the factors that distinguish those who have committed hands-on offenses against a child from those who do not commit such offenses. This empirical knowledge would advance the understanding of risk of recidivism and the relationship between online and offline offending. (For information on "Adult Sex Offender Recidivism," see chapter 5 in the Adult section.) For example, it has been

> *"Online-only Internet offenders have a relatively low risk for sexual recidivism compared to offline contact sexual offenders."*

hypothesized that Internet offenders who are lower in self-control (e.g., more impulsive, higher in risk-taking) will be more likely to commit hands-on offenses than those who are higher in self-control (Seto, 2008). Consistent with this idea, Lee and colleagues (2012) found that online offenders who had committed contact offenses scored higher on a measure of antisocial behavior and traits than online offenders who had no known history of hands-on victims. McCarthy (2010) found that "dual" offenders (i.e., individuals who had committed both contact and online sexual offenses) were more likely to be diagnosed with pedophilia and more likely to have prior sexual offenses in their histories.

Contact Offending in the Future

Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin (2011) also reviewed recidivism rates from 9 samples of Internet offenders (a total sample size of 2,630 online offenders) followed for an average of slightly more than 3 years (ranging from 1.5 to 6 years at risk). Approximately 1 in 20 (4.6 percent) Internet offenders committed a new sexual offense of some kind during this time period, with 2 percent committing a contact sexual offense and 3.4 percent committing a new child pornography offense; some offenders committed both types of crimes. Although the followup times are relatively short for this kind of research, and recidivism rates are expected to increase with more opportunity, these recidivism rates are lower than those observed in recidivism studies of offline offenders (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) and belie the idea that all Internet offenders pose a high risk of committing contact offenses in the future. Indeed, there may be a subgroup of online-only offenders who pose relatively little risk for a contact sexual offense.

In a recent preliminary analysis of data from 101 federal child pornography offenders in the United States, using data obtained from the U.S. Sentencing Commission, Burgess, Carretta, and Burgess

(2012) noted that a majority of the offenders were employed (68 percent), had some college education (58 percent), were married or had previously been married (59 percent), and had no prior criminal offenses (53 percent). Offenders with these kinds of characteristics are relatively unlikely to criminally offend again (compared to those who are unemployed, did not complete high school, had never married, and had prior offenses).

Internet offenders are not homogeneous with regard to risk. Some of them pose a relatively high risk of directly victimizing children (or indirectly victimizing children by again accessing child pornography), and an important task for law enforcement and for clinicians is to identify those higher risk individuals in order to prioritize cases and make more efficient decisions about resources.

Recidivism Risk Factors

Research is beginning to emerge on the factors that predict recidivism among Internet sex offenders, although more studies using large samples, a set of theoretically or empirically plausible risk factor candidates, longer followup times, and comprehensive criminal records are clearly needed. These initially identified risk factors appear to be the same kinds of risk factors seen in decades of research on contact sex offenders, and in research on all kinds of offenders generally. For example, recent studies have shown that well-established nonsexual criminological factors such as offender age at time of first arrest, prior criminal history, and failure on prior conditional release (such as bail or parole) can predict sexual recidivism among child pornography offenders (Seto & Eke, 2005; Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2011). Unpublished data suggest that other factors (such as substance use problems and admissions of sexual interest in children) can also predict contact sexual offending (e.g., Eke & Seto, 2012). Among child pornography offenders, the ratio of content depicting boys compared to girls predicts child pornography recidivism (Eke & Seto, 2012), which is in line with much research showing that contact sex offenders who target boys are more likely to be pedophiles and more likely to sexually reoffend than those who target girls (Seto, 2008).

Other researchers are finding similar results. Faust, Renaud, and Bickart (2009) examined predictors of recidivism in a sample of 870 child pornography offenders assessed by the Federal Bureau of Prisons between 2002 and 2005. The average length of followup was almost 4 years, with a sexual offense rearrest rate of 5.7 percent for contact or noncontact offenses, including child pornography. Of the 30 predictors examined, 5 were significant predictors of sexual rearrest: lower education level, being single, possessing non-Internet child pornography, prior sex offender treatment (likely a proxy for having a prior sexual offending history), and **not** possessing depictions of adolescent minors (suggesting that those who show a preference for depictions of prepubescent children are at greater risk).

As well, Wakeling, Howard, and Barnett (2011) showed that a modified version of an established risk measure (the Risk Matrix 2000; Thornton, 2007) could predict sexual recidivism in a large sample of Internet offenders in the United Kingdom. Risk Matrix items include offender age, sexual and any other sentencing history, having a male victim, having a stranger victim, ever having a live-in romantic relationship, and having any noncontact offenses. Wakeling and her colleagues obtained recidivism data on 1,326 offenders followed for 1 year (2.1 percent recidivism rate) and 994 of these offenders followed for 2 years (3.1 percent recidivism rate). Although the base rate of sexual recidivism was relatively low after 1 or 2 years, making it more statistically difficult to identify significant predictors, the measure was nonetheless significantly predictive—to a similar degree as established risk measures with contact offenders. Three-quarters of the new sexual offenses were for Internet crimes.

If this research—showing that the same risk factors that are useful in predicting recidivism among conventional contact sex offenders operate similarly for Internet offenders—holds up in subsequent replications, then clinicians will be empirically justified to use modified versions of existing risk measures to assess Internet offenders, such as the Static-99 (Harris et al., 2003) or Risk Matrix 2000. This research is at an early stage and thus it is too soon to confidently conclude that existing risk measures (modified or not) will accurately predict sexual recidivism by Internet offenders who have no history of contact sexual offending. The applicability and validity of risk measures to Internet offenders who do have a history of contact sexual offending is not in question. Clinicians and others are clearly justified in using existing risk measures to assess the risk of Internet offenders who are known to have a history of contact sexual offending.

Intervention

There is relatively little literature on the treatment of Internet offenders. Typically, knowledge about characteristics and risk of recidivism is established before knowledge about treatment approaches and outcomes because of the time it takes to develop and implement programs and then evaluate them for recidivism. Sex offender treatment and supervision professionals are struggling to respond to the increasing influx of Internet offenders. Key questions have yet to be addressed regarding intervention, including what the priority treatment targets are, how they should be targeted, and whether interventions can reduce recidivism.

The most clearly articulated program at this time appears to be the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (i-SOTP) developed by Middleton and Hayes (2006). This program was created as a result of treatment provider concerns about mixing Internet and contact offenders in group therapy as well as questions about the applicability of some treatment components and targets of conventional contact sex offender treatment programs (McGrath et al., 2009). The program is based on contemporary models of contact sexual offending that emphasize cognitive-behavioral principles, but it also draws in elements of positive psychology, 12-step, and self-help approaches (which is also common among conventional contact sex offender programs). The program is intended to be less intense than the standard conventional sex offender program available in the United Kingdom; it involves fewer (20 to 30) sessions in either individual or group format and more Internet-relevant content. The evidence available so far on risk of recidivism suggests that more intensive interventions are required only by a minority of Internet offenders (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). A substantial number of Internet sex offenders (e.g., child pornography possession-only offenders with no prior criminal history) are likely to be served well by less intensive interventions (Andrews & Bonta, 2006).

The i-SOTP content is organized into six modules corresponding to major dynamic risk factors identified in contact sex offender research, including general self-regulation problems (e.g., difficulties in controlling impulses), sexual self-regulation problems (e.g., specific difficulty controlling sexual urges), offense-supportive attitudes and beliefs (e.g., believing that children depicted in child pornography images are not crime victims), and interpersonal deficits (e.g., poor social skills). These factors are dynamic because they can change over time (e.g., after consuming alcohol) and any such changes are associated with fluctuations in risk to reoffend. Dynamic risk factors can be distinguished from static risk factors that do not or cannot change (e.g., history of alcoholism) and are typical of well-validated and commonly used sex offender risk measures such as the Static-99. Static risk factors provide the best long-term prediction of recidivism but they do not identify potential treatment and supervision targets. Treatments and other interventions that can successfully target dynamic risk factors are more likely to lead to reductions in recidivism.

Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, and Hayes (2009) reported preliminary results from a pre-/post-treatment evaluation of 264 Internet offenders. There were significant changes on 10 of 12 psychological measures, many corresponding to the treatment targets just described. However, there was no comparison group, so it is not clear how much of these changes can be attributed to the treatment as opposed to the passage of time, probation involvement, or participation in other programs. Another more rigorous evaluation is needed with either a no-treatment (e.g., waiting list) or treatment-as-usual comparison group in order to know if changes over time can be attributed to the i-SOTP program. Continuing followup is also needed to determine if treatment participation (especially treatment-related changes on specific targets) are related to changes in recidivism in the desired direction.

Another interesting self-help treatment approach is provided by the Croga.org Web site. Also adopting a blend of cognitive-behavioral, 12-step, and self-help techniques, this Web site includes many of the topics covered by i-SOTP but is available to anyone with an Internet connection. The main aim of this Web site is to reach individuals who are engaging in problematic online behaviors before they commit contact offenses. Given that many such individuals are undetected by authorities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010), any comprehensive response to Internet offending will need to include a self-help component. A similar service is provided by nongovernmental organizations such as Stop It Now!, which provides a free, confidential, toll-free helpline along with access to online resources for individuals who are concerned about their sexual interests or behavior involving children. One benefit of self-help and confidential approaches is that a larger group of at-risk individuals can be reached, especially in light of evidence that many online offenders go undetected. Another benefit is the relatively low cost of such interventions. A disadvantage is the likelihood that the highest risk individuals (those who have an antisocial orientation and already engage in contact sexual offending) are probably less likely to seek self-help options. Another disadvantage is that followup data will not be available to evaluate the efficacy of these services.

Undetected Internet offenders are unlikely to seek help given the severe stigma associated with self-identifying as being sexually interested in children or engaging, directly or indirectly, in the sexual exploitation of children. Undetected offenders are also likely to be inhibited by mandatory reporting requirements, as they cannot talk honestly about illegal acts they have committed. A research and treatment project (the Dunkelfeld Project) currently underway in Berlin, Germany, was able to recruit a large sample of self-identified individuals who were sexually interested in children (Beier et al., 2009; Neutze et al., 2011). Most individuals in the sample (95 percent) had engaged in illegal behavior at some time in their lives, but some had been inactive and had not committed a sexual offense in the previous 6 months. These men were reached through a mass media campaign involving billboard and other public advertisements as well as television and radio spots. An evaluation of the project is currently underway.

Summary

It is clear from this review that research on Internet offending is relatively new and that there are substantial gaps in our knowledge about Internet offenders and the crimes they commit. At the same time, research conducted over the past 10 years (paralleling the emergence of the Internet in everyday life) sheds some helpful light on some key issues.

Increasing Demand

There is consistent evidence that the number of Internet sexual offending cases is increasing rapidly, with major implications for law enforcement, criminal justice, correctional, and clinical agencies. More precise state-by-state data are needed, however, to better understand the breadth and depth of this increasing demand in order to allocate resources wisely and to determine if there are meaningful geographic differences that might suggest solutions to this demand (e.g., states with sex offender management boards may be better able to cope with the demand than states that do not have this integration of systems and services). (For more on "Sex Offender Management Strategies," see chapter 8 in the Adult section.)

Solicitation Offenders

Most of the research on Internet offenders has focused on child pornography offenders. Less is known about the characteristics, contact offending history, and risk of recidivism posed by solicitation offenders and the extent to which they differ from child pornography offenders (who also use online technologies to commit their crimes) and contact sex offenders (who have actually attempted to make or have made physical contact with a victim). Also, little is known about offenders who use the Internet to commit sex crimes against adults (e.g., using Craigslist or other online services to meet women whom they intend to sexually assault) or to commit conspiracy crimes (e.g., organizing child sex tourism to other jurisdictions, child pornography trading rings, "abuse on demand" via live streaming of images or video).

Internet Offending Types

Emerging research suggests that solicitation offenders are different from child pornography offenders in meaningful ways.

"Internet-facilitated sexual offending includes various types of crimes, including

In particular, child pornography offenders are likely to be pedophiles, whereas solicitation offenders appear to be predominantly interested in adolescent girls. This apparent difference might result from two different selection effects. First, individuals who are primarily interested in images of underage but sexually mature minors (e.g., girls between ages 15 and 17) are less likely to be prosecuted because of the challenges in establishing the ages of the depicted minors, in contrast to the relatively straightforward prosecution of someone in possession of images depicting prepubescent or pubescent children. Second, there may indeed be individuals interested in sexually soliciting younger children, but younger children are less likely to be on social networking and similar sites (many of which have age restrictions; e.g., Facebook has a minimum age criterion of 13, although this may be flouted by some younger children). This apparent difference in Internet offender motivations may translate to differences in contact offending history, risk of recidivism, and the likely targets of other criminal sexual behavior (young children versus adolescent minors).

possession, distribution, and production of child pornography; sexual solicitations; and conspiracy crimes."

Overlap With Contact Offending

"Child pornography offenders are likely to be pedophiles."

Only one in eight Internet offenders has an official record for contact offending, based on available studies (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). The proportion goes up to approximately four in eight when self-reported offending is added, but this still falls short of the idea that most or all Internet offenders have already committed contact offenses. Internet offenders and conventional sex offenders are not synonymous groups.

An important area for future research is to explore the relationship between Internet and contact offending. This encompasses multiple research questions, including: What predicts the onset of online offending? How do dual offenders (those who commit both online and offline offenses) differ from online-only or offline-only offenders? What predicts the progression from Internet to contact offending? Related questions are whether child pornography and solicitation offenders differ in their contact offending histories and the trajectories leading to these different forms of Internet crime.

Risk of Reoffending

More research is needed, but an analysis of nine available followup studies suggests that Internet offenders, as a group, have a relatively low risk of reoffending compared to conventional contact sex offenders (based on official records, which are conservative estimates of recidivism because of reporting biases and other factors). This has implications for how we respond to Internet offending, given that the risk principle of effective corrections would suggest that legal, policy, and clinical responses to Internet offenders should be proportional to risk. The minority of offenders who have a higher risk of reoffending—based on age, criminal history, and other factors that are being identified in ongoing research—require different responses than offenders with no prior criminal history and clear evidence of stability and prosocial conduct in all other domains of their lives. Research distinguishing between different types of Internet offenders will likely be helpful in this regard.

Intervention

More research on the onset and maintenance of Internet sexual offending is needed to design effective interventions for those who require it. Existing interventions represent adaptations of current sex offender treatment models, which may or may not work for Internet offenders. Although other areas require research attention, intervention is the area with the largest gaps in knowledge.

Notes

[1] Solicitation offenders have also been called "travelers" in previous research on this population, while child pornography offenders have been called "traders." Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011), discussed in more detail later in the chapter, have distinguished between solicitation offenders who appear to be fantasy driven (restricting their sexual interactions to online behavior such as sexually explicit chat, exhibitionism via Webcam, and/or transmission of pornography) and those who appear to be contact driven (whose online interactions are directed at arranging face-to-face meetings where sexual activities might take place).

[2] A meta-analysis combines the results of many evaluations into one large study with many subjects.

[3] The Butner Redux study by Bourke and Hernandez (2009), which is often cited in court proceedings pertaining to online offenders, was a statistical outlier in the Seto, Hanson, and Babchishin (2011) meta-analysis. This indicates that the study found an unusually high prevalence of contact offending history: 24 percent of the sample of 155 child pornography offenders had a known history of contact offending prior to treatment; however, following treatment (and polygraph examination for approximately half of the sample), 85 percent admitted to contact offenses or had an official contact offense history.

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