# Internet–Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation Crimes

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## INTRODUCTION

The computer innovations of the late 20th Century had a transformative impact on society, revolutionizing many aspects of social life including education, commerce, and recreation. These technological developments have also impacted crime. Many types of criminal behavior have changed and new forms emerged in response to the advent of the Internet. Examples include hacking, cyberbullying, fraud, cyberstalking, and gambling. Internet crimes against children are among the most prominent manifestations of this phenomenon.

## BACKGROUND

Internet crimes against are defined as those offenses that include an element of computer-facilitated sexual exploitation of minors (Alexy, Burgess, & Baker, 2005). First, the Internet is now the main mechanism for accessing and distributing child pornography. Second is the well-publicized problem of adults soliciting minors for sex. Third, the Internet is used to facilitate the commercial sexual exploitation of children (e.g., sex trafficking of juveniles, commercial distribution of child pornography). Fourth, the Internet serves as a social consolidation mechanism allowing adults with a sexual interest in children to network with each other. Additionally, the Internet plays a secondary role in the victimization of children by allowing offenders who have a pre-existing relationship with a minor (e.g., family members or acquaintances) to use this medium to facilitate contact offending.

## Offenses, Offenders, and Victims

The Internet is now the primary medium for accessing and distributing child pornography. These materials can now be instantaneously shared with, an anonymously accessed, by a global audience. For instance, an Interpol child abuse image data base contains more than a half a million images (Elliot & Beech, 2009). A recent study of the peer-to-peer file sharing network Gnutella found approximately 250,000 American computers shared 120,148 unique child pornography images during a one-year period (Wolak, Liberatore, & Levine, 2014). On the most fundamental level, these images represent a permanent record of the sexual exploitation of a minor (Lanning, 2010). The mere demand for this material fuels the further sexual abuse and exploitation of children (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). Concerns have been raised that this easy access to child pornography online might contribute to a new category of offender who succumbs to temptations that might have otherwise been held in check (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015).

Individuals who collect and/or traffic child pornography via the Internet are traditionally referred to as "traders" by law enforcement (Alexy et al., 2005). The National Juvenile Online Victimiza-

tion (NJOV) studies have gathered data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies regarding arrests for child pornography (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011; 2012a; 2012b). The results revealed that offenders in these cases are overwhelmingly single white men over the age of 25. Most of the offenders arrested on child pornography charges had material depicting prepubescent children, and a substantial portion had images of children less than 5 years of age. There appears to be an association between the possession of child pornography and engaging in contact sexual offenses against minors. An examination of 2009 arrest data suggests that one-third of suspects arrested for online child pornography offenses were actively molesting minors (Wolak et al, 2012a). Moreover, a meta-analysis of published studies of online (primarily child pornography) offenders found that approximately 1 in 8 of these men had a prior criminal record for contact sexual offenses (Seto et al., 2011). However, the same analysis found that about one-half of these individuals self-reported committing contact offenses. Similarly, Bourke and Hernandez (2009), who conducted a study of 155 offenders who were serving terms for online child pornography charges, found that although 26% of these men had official criminal records for sex crimes against minors, 85% of these men admitted to having committed at least one contact offense against a minor while in treatment.

A second category of Internet crimes against children involves adults using the Internet to solicit children for sexual purposes. These offenders have been called "travelers" by law enforcement (Alexy et al., 2005), and their online behavior has been referred to a "grooming", "luring" or "predation" (Urbas, 2010). They engage in sexually orientated communications with minors, often with the intention of arranging offline encounters. They have been the subject of intense media scrutiny in the United States, and police stings aimed at catching these offenders were sensationally featured on the popular television show *Dateline NBC: To Catch a Predator*. Communication is frequently on-going, and a relationship between the of-

fender and target can develop over the course of several weeks or months. These solicitations are sometimes aggressive, and can contain explicit sexual content. Offenders may send pornography to their target, as well as exposing their genitals and masturbating on web cams (Marcum, 2007). They may also encourage minors to send them suggestive or explicit photos (Wolak et al., 2011). The most recent research suggests these offenders are increasingly turning to social networking sites to locate and groom potential victims (Balfe et al., 2015).

It is important to understand that the online behavior of these men frequently constitutes a crime. The sexually explicit communication with a minor may constitute the offense of enticement or importuning (DeLong, Durkin, & Hundersmarck, 2010). However, the media coverage of "Internet predators" tends to give an inaccurate picture of this type of offense. Based on research this evidence, this crime often fits the model of statutory rape, inasmuch as adult men try to develop a relationship with young teens and "seduce" them into an eventual encounter (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Data form the NJOV studies indicate that over 90% of the victims in these cases are between the ages of 13-17. Most of the victims are female adolescents. Violence or force is used less than 5% of these cases. A study of online solicitation in Europe produced very similar findings (Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, Hoyer, & Santtila, 2015). These offenders are normally not pedophiles, rather they are antisocial adult males who are willing to purse sexual activities with minors who show signs of sexual development but who are below the age of consent (Seto, 2010).

Research has also focused on the risks factors associated with the online sexual solicitation of minors. Results of the second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS2), a national study of 11 to 17 year old adolescents, identified various factors that are associated with receiving aggressive online sexual solicitations (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007). These included being female, visiting chat rooms, discussing sexual topics

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