Chapter 66
Internet Crimes against Children

Keith F. Durkin
Ohio Northern University, USA

Ronald L. DeLong
Ohio Northern University, USA &MidWest Ohio Forensic Services, Inc., USA

ABSTRACT

Internet crimes against children are a contemporary social problem which has drawn a great deal of attention from the parents, educators, legislators, and law enforcement officials. This phenomenon has captured national attention in the United States with a number of media reports of this phenomenon. These crimes include child pornography offenses, as well as adults soliciting minors for sexual purposes on line. Drawing upon data from recent national surveys, the characteristics of offenses, offenders, and victims are examined. A multitude of issues related to the assessment and classification of the individuals who commit Internet crimes against children are also explored. Strategies for the prevention of this behavior and enforcement of laws protecting children online are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations frequently have a transformative impact on society. Computer mediated communications have revolutionized many aspects of social life such as commerce, education and recreation. Not surprisingly, many forms of criminal behavior have changed, and new ones arisen, in response to Internet tech-

nology. Some examples include Internet fraud, hacking, cyberstalking, and illegal gambling. However, the most prominent manifestation of this phenomenon is the sexual victimization of children online. Internet crimes against children are "defined as any computer facilitated sexual exploitation of children" (Alexy, Burgess, & Baker 2005, p.804). There are two main forms of this behavior. The first involves using the Internet to traffic and/or collect child pornography. The second involves the widely publicized problem

of adult men soliciting sex from minors on-line. These contemporary problems have implications for professionals and practitioners in a number of areas including education, psychology, social service and criminal justice.

OFFENSES, OFFENDERS, AND VICTIMS

The Internet has become the primary avenue for accessing and distributing child pornography. Now this material can be instantaneously shared with, an anonymously accessed, by a global audience. For instance, an Interpol child abuse image data base currently contains more than a half a million images (Elliot & Beech, 2009). One international child pornography ring called the Wonderland Club required members to share at least 10,000 new child sexual abuse images for membership (Krone, 2005). On the most fundamental level, these images represent a permanent record of the actual sexual abuse or exploitation of a child (Lanning, 2010). With Internet technology, theoretically the image of this abuse can be shared with and accessed by an infinite number of people. There is also a subtype of offender who commits crimes against children to produce pornography that is then shared and even sold on the Internet (Webb, Craissaiti, & Keen, 2007). The mere demand for this type of material fuels the further sexual abuse and exploitation of children (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011).

Individuals who collect and/or traffic child pornography via the Internet are commonly referred to as "traders" by law enforcement (Alexy et al., 2005). The National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV) Study gathered data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies regarding arrests for child pornography (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011). The results revealed that offenders in these cases are overwhelmingly white men over the age of 25. Furthermore, approximately 70% of these offenders were single.

Additionally, most of the offenders arrested on child pornography charges had material depicting prepubescent children (nearly half had images of children 3 to 5 years of age) and serious sexual abuse. The primary motivation for these offenders is sexual in nature. For instance, a recent study of these offenders found the primary aim of accessing and downloading child pornography from the Internet is sexual arousal, with offenders typically masturbating to such images (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

There is a clear association between the possession of child pornography and engaging in contact sexual offenses against minors. One out of every six criminal cases initiated solely as a child pornography investigation discovers an offender who is actively committing offenses against minors (Wolak et al., 2011). A recent 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 admitted to committing contact offenses against minors. Similarly, Bourke and Hernandez (2009) conducted a study of 155 offenders who were serving terms for online child pornography charges. They discovered that although 26% of these men had official criminal records for sex crimes against minors, 85% of these men actually 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. They engage minors in sexually orientated communications (e.g., "computer chat") often with the intention of arranging offline sexual encounters. These offenders have been the subject of rather intense media scrutiny in the United States, and police stings aimed at catching these offenders have been featured on the popular television show *To Catch a Predator*. These offenders have been called "travelers" by law enforcement (Alexy

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