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UNH Study Finds Many Youth Exposed to Sexual Solicitation, Pornography and Harassment on Internet

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- One out of four youth who used the Internet regularly last year was exposed to unwanted pornography, and nearly one in five encountered unwanted sexual solicitations and approaches, according to a new national survey by the [University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center \(CCRC\)](#). Few of these incidents were reported to authorities, and more than half were not disclosed to parents.

The study, "Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth," was released today at a news conference in Washington, D.C. UNH Professor David Finkelhor, director of CCRC, presented the first-of-its-kind research. He was joined by co-authors Kimberly Mitchell and Janis Wolak, also of the CCRC, along with Sen. Judd Gregg (R-NH), whose Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, Judiciary and Related Agencies has held hearings about children's safety online.

According to the study, which was funded by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 19 percent of regular Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17 in the last year received unwanted online requests to engage in sexual activities or to provide intimate sexual information. In 15 percent of such incidents, the solicitor attempted to contact the youth in person, over the telephone or by mail -- incidents the study called "aggressive solicitations." None of the solicited youth who were interviewed actually suffered sexual assaults or sexual abuse as a result of these episodes; however, 25 percent of them reported being very upset or frightened.

Twenty-five percent of the youth interviewed in the study had been exposed to unwanted online pornography in the past year. Most of these exposures occurred while they were searching the web, as a result of opening links or misspelling web addresses. A quarter of the unwanted pornography exposures were the result of email or Instant Messages that youth opened.

The study also finds that 6 percent of youth were subjected to harassment of a non-sexual sort that included threats of physical harm or postings of defamatory or embarrassing information.

According to the researchers, levels of exposure to offensive behavior, such as that revealed in the study, would not be acceptable in public. They note, however, that most youth were not bothered much by what they encountered on the Internet. Some were quite distressed, however, and even experienced stress symptoms, as a result of the troubling incidents.

The report also emphasizes the need to better educate families and young people about sources of help and protection against online victimization. It points out that in addition to the fact that youth and parents rarely reported offensive episodes, only 17 percent of the youth and 10 percent of their parents could actually name an authority to whom they might report such events. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children runs one such service, the CyberTipline (www.cybertipline.com).

Another defense against offensive Internet encounters is commercially available filtering and blocking software, which screens out certain sexually oriented websites or language. Despite high levels of parental concern, though, the study finds only one-third of families actually used any filtering or blocking software, including the software made available by Internet service providers themselves. The report urges better understanding of why families by-pass these available protections.

The study also encourages training for mental health, school and family counselors about these new Internet hazards, so they can help young people deal with distressing and potentially dangerous online experiences.

In one recommendation, the authors emphasize the need to better recognize the variety of hazards facing children online. "A stereotype of the ... Internet 'pedophile' has come to dominate much of the discussion," the report says, but the survey reveals many offensive and potentially exploitative episodes, including non-sexual incidents, coming from other youth and even from women.

In another recommendation, the study called for more involvement of young people in planning Internet protection strategies. According to the findings, Internet sexual offenses target a somewhat older, more exclusively teenage population than conventional

"offline" child molestation, which targets 7 to 13 year olds. "Good protection strategies, especially for the teen group ... need to be tied to youth aspirations, values and culture. That requires the input of youth."

The report concludes, "Because the Internet is likely to become so important in our lives, it is crucial to begin to confront its potential problematic aspects as early as possible."

In light of concerns raised by the study, Sen. Gregg called for a three-pronged strategy to improve youth online safety that would include education for children and parents, better blocking and filtering software, and aggressive prosecution of Internet offenders.

Ernest Allen, president of the National Center for Missing and Exploited called for more research to track the growth in the number of children whose Internet contacts turn into real-line sex crimes. He said FBI, local law enforcement and his own center know of almost 800 such cases in recent months.

"Online Victimization: A report on the Nation's Youth" is available from the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children at 1-800-843-5678 and online at <http://www.missingkids.com/>.

The study was based on half hour telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,501 youth who used the Internet at least once a month and separate interviews with their caretakers, conducted between August 1999 and February 2000. The findings have a margin of error of 2 to 3 percent.

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