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OJJDP FACT SHEET

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Highlights of the Youth Internet Safety Survey

by David Finkelhor, Kimberly Mitchell, and Janis Wolak

The Youth Internet Safety Survey, conducted by the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, collected information about incidents of possible online victimization through telephone interviews with a national sample of 1,501 youth ages 10 through 17 who used the Internet regularly (at least once a month for the past 6 months). The survey addressed three main issues: sexual solicitations and approaches, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment.

Sexual Solicitations and Approaches

The survey revealed that many youth are victims of online sexual solicitations:

- ◆ Almost one in five (19 percent) of the young Internet users surveyed received an unwanted sexual solicitation in the past year.
- ◆ Five percent of the surveyed youth received a distressing sexual solicitation (i.e., the solicitation made them feel very or extremely upset or afraid).
- ◆ Three percent of the youth received an aggressive solicitation involving offline contact or attempts or requests for offline contact.
- ◆ None of the solicitations led to an actual sexual contact or assault.

One-third of the surveyed youth who had received a solicitation were male; two-thirds were female. The great majority (77 percent) of the victims were 14 to 17 years old; however, almost one quarter were ages 10 to 13. The younger group reported 37 percent of the distressing solicitations.

Ninety-seven percent of the solicitors were strangers. According to the youth, adults (age 18 and older) made 24 percent of all solicitations and 34 percent of aggressive solicitations. Juveniles made 48 percent of all solicitations and 48 percent of aggressive solicitations. (The age of the solicitor was unknown in the remaining incidents.) Two-thirds of all solicitations came from males. One quarter of aggressive solicitations came from females.

However, identities are easy to disguise on the Internet, so the solicitors may not have been the age or gender they claimed to be.

Seventy percent of these unwanted solicitations happened when the youth was using a computer at home, and most of the remaining 30 percent happened at someone else's home. Two-thirds of the solicitations took place in chat rooms, and 24 percent were received through Instant Messages (e-mail messages sent and received in real time).

Most of the incidents (75 percent) were described by youth as not distressing, but 25 percent were described as very or extremely upsetting or frightening. The respondents did not tell anyone about 49 percent of the sexual solicitations. Twenty-four percent were disclosed to parents. More than one-third of aggressive incidents (i.e., the solicitor tried to make personal contact) were undisclosed.

Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material

The survey also found that many youth are exposed to sexually explicit pictures on the Internet without seeking or expecting them:

- ◆ Twenty-five percent of the surveyed youth reported unwanted exposures to sexual material.
- ◆ Six percent of the youth had experienced distressing exposures (i.e., the exposure made them very or extremely upset).

A slightly higher percentage of boys than girls reported exposures (57 percent vs. 42 percent) or distressing exposures (55 percent vs. 45 percent). Almost two-thirds of exposures were to youth ages 15 to 17. Less than one-tenth were to 11- and 12-year-olds, and none to 10-year-olds.

Seventy-one percent of the exposures occurred while youth were surfing or searching the Web, with the rest occurring through e-mail or Instant Messages. In 67 percent of the incidents, youth were at home when the unwanted exposure occurred; in 15 percent, they were at school; in 13 percent, they were at someone else's home; and in 3 percent, they were at a library.

The great majority of exposures involved pictures with nudity; 38 percent showed people having sex. Eight percent included violent images. Twenty-three percent of the incidents of unwanted exposure were described as very or extremely upsetting; however, most incidents were not reported to be distressing. Forty-four percent of incidents were undisclosed.

Harassment

The survey also revealed that some youth are victims of online harassment:

- ◆ Six percent of the young people surveyed reported harassment incidents (threats, rumors, or other offensive behavior) during the past year.
- ◆ Two percent of the surveyed youth reported episodes of distressing harassment (i.e., the incident made them feel very or extremely upset or afraid).

Other Findings

Overall, few of the solicitations, exposures, and harassments were reported to authorities (police, hotlines, Internet service providers, or teachers). For example, only 18 percent of even the most serious incidents, aggressive solicitations, were reported. When reports were made, it was mostly to Internet service providers.

Most of the families with youth who used the Internet regularly did not use filtering or blocking software. Thirty-eight percent had used such software at some time in the past year, but 5 percent had discontinued its use.

Conclusion

Many young people are being subjected to dangerous and inappropriate experiences on the Internet. The offenses and offenders are diverse, and the primary vulnerable population is teenagers. The study yielded a number of recommendations, including the following:

- ◆ Youth and families should be encouraged to report incidents to Internet service providers and, when appropriate, to law enforcement.

- ◆ Online reporting resources like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC's) CyberTipline (www.cybertipline.com) should be better publicized to reach a broader audience of youth.
- ◆ Mental health, school, and family counselors should receive training about the effects of online hazards on youth.
- ◆ More understanding is needed about families' knowledge of, attitudes about, and experiences with filtering and blocking software.
- ◆ Concern about Internet victimization should not eclipse efforts to combat other forms of youth victimization (e.g., assault, abuse, and neglect).

The Youth Internet Safety Survey was commissioned by NCMEC and supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Complete results from the survey are available in *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, which can be downloaded at www.missingkids.com (select the links "Education and Resources," "Library of Resources," and "Internet").

For Further Information

For further information, contact the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Charles B. Wang International Children's Building, 699 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-3175, 703-274-3900 (phone), 703-274-2222 (fax), www.missingkids.com (Internet) or the Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824, 603-862-1888 (phone), 603-862-1122 (fax), www.unh.edu/ccrc/ (Internet).

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