

Are Crimes By Online Predators Different From Crimes By Sex Offenders Who Know Youth In-Person?

Aims

This U.S. study examined cases in which sex offenders arrested for Internet-related crimes used the Internet or cell phones for sexual communications with minors. It compared crimes by offenders who met victims online to those by offenders who knew victims in-person prior to the offence, and examined whether the crimes by online meeting offenders were different or more dangerous than those by offenders who knew the victims in-person and used similar tactics.

Key Findings

- There were an estimated 1,490 arrests for Internet related sex crimes against minors that included online sexual communications with victims in 2009 in the U.S. 672 arrests were for crimes by online-meeting offenders, and 817 for crimes by know-in-person/online offenders.

Were arrested online-meeting offenders different or more dangerous in terms of personal characteristics?

- Arrested online-meeting offenders who had online sexual communications with victims were similar to know-in-person/online offenders who used such tactics in several respects. In each group, about half were aged 25 years or younger and about half were employed full-time. Most were unmarried and/or did not live with partners (82% of online and 71% of offline offenders were single).
- Few had prior arrests for sexual offences against minors (6% of online and 8% of know-in-person offenders); similar proportions possessed child pornography when they were arrested (14% of online and 17% of know-in-person offenders).
- Online-meeting offenders were more likely to belong to minority racial or ethnic groups (32% of online versus 13% of know-in-person). Know-in-person/online offenders were more likely to live with children (16% of online versus 33% know-in-person), have histories of violent behaviour (4% of online versus 15%), problems with drugs or alcohol (11% of online versus 29%), and prior arrests for non-sexual offences (19% of online versus 44%).

Did the online-meeting offenders target a different group of victims?

- Victims were largely similar, whether offenders met them online or knew them in-person. In both categories of cases, the majority of victims were girls aged 13-17 years (90% of online and 85% of know-in-person offenders). The victim groups were similar in terms of family status, previous criminal victimization, delinquency, and problems with drugs or alcohol.

Did the online-meeting offenders use different strategies to commit sex crimes or commit more dangerous offences?

- 76% of online-meeting offenders used both Internet and cell phones to facilitate their crimes, while 59% of know-in-person/online offenders used cell phones only. With one exception, most other case characteristics were similar. In both categories, online interactions lasted a month or more in most cases, and many offenders went beyond sexual conversations. About 40% of offenders in both groups asked victims to engage in sexual acts such as masturbation during online interactions, and about half sent or showed sexual pictures to or solicited sexual pictures from victims. There were no statistically significant differences in the types of sexual offences committed. In both

categories, around 3% of cases involved sexual violence. Elements such as coercion, blackmail, abduction, illegal detention, or physical assault were uncommon and occurred at similar rates, no matter how the offender knew the victim. In both categories, considerable numbers of cases did not include contact sexual offences (43% of online and 48% of know-in-person offenders). These were mostly cases of child pornography production in which offenders solicited victims to create sexual images of themselves (47% of online and 50% of know-in-person offenders). There was only one difference in offence strategies, with online-meeting offenders being more likely to be deceptive in their online interactions than offline offenders (15% by claiming to be minors, 6% using more elaborate deceptions). Most online meeting offenders were not deceptive, however.

Methodology

The data were collected as part of the Third National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV-3) Study. A stratified national sample of 2,653 U.S. law enforcement agencies were contacted to request data on arrests in 2009 for Internet-related sexual exploitation against minors, with detailed telephone interviews conducted with investigators about individual cases. The data presented here examines a subset of arrest cases that included the use of online sexual communications (n = 143 online-meeting offenders; n = 139 know-in-person/online offenders).

Policy Implications

Rather than programs that focus exclusively on crimes by online-meeting offenders, prevention efforts should educate youth, families, and the public about the nature of statutory rape offences in general. This should include offender tactics that include seduction, manipulation, and grooming, both online and in-person. Although programs should include information about ways that both online-meeting and know-in-person offenders may use online communications to deceive victims, this should not be emphasized over more typical case scenarios. Youth should know that illegal acts include non-contact offences such as soliciting youth for sex, asking youth to masturbate or engage in cybersex, or sending or soliciting sexual images, whether these incidents happen online or offline, and no matter what the relationship to the offender.

Source Wolak, J. D., & Finkelhor, D. (2013). Are crimes by online predators different from crimes by sex offenders who know youth in-person? *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(6), 736-41.

<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV263.pdf>

Research Team Janis Wolak, J.D. and Professor David Finkelhor, Ph.D.

Contact information Janis Wolak (janis.wolak@unh.edu).