

Online Victimization of Youth, Revisited

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In 2000, a study was conducted to determine how many youth in America were being victimized via the Internet. The statistics gave us some alarming statistics:

- 1 in 5 youth have received unwanted sexual solicitations online
- 1 in 4 youth have received unwanted exposure to sexual material online
- 1 in 15 youth have received harassment, threatening, or other offensive behavior directed at them online

Online victimization is characterized by the following criteria:

Sexual solicitations and approaches: Requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or give personal sexual information that were unwanted or, whether wanted or not, made by an adult.

Aggressive sexual solicitation: Sexual solicitations involving offline contact with the perpetrator through regular mail, by telephone, or in person or attempts or requests for offline contact.

Unwanted exposure to sexual material: Without seeking or expecting sexual material, being exposed to pictures of naked people or people having sex when doing online searches, surfing the web, opening E-mail, or instant messages, or opening links in E-mail or instant messages.

Harassment: Threats or offensive behavior (not sexual solicitation), sent online to the youth or posted online about the youth for others to see.

Not all such incidents were distressing to the youth who experienced them. Distressing incidents were episodes where youth rated themselves as very or extremely upset or afraid as a result of the incident.

This study raised the public awareness of how the Internet can be (and is being) used by predators to target prospective victims. This led to an ongoing campaign to educate parents and youth to the dangers posed online, especially in anonymous chat rooms (where anyone can be anyone).

Web filtering, parental controls, and key stroke logging have become the new buzzwords as parents seek to protect their children from dangers that lurk in cyberspace. Organizations like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the National Security Alliance Kid-Safe Network have been at the forefront of the “danger awareness” education and safety training. Countless workshops, seminars, and resource fairs have been presented to equip and inform a generation of families.

A revised study was finalized in 2006, and the recently released results shows we have made some progress, but we still have a long way to go. The most telling of the recent statistics are as follows:

- 1 in 7 youth have received unwanted sexual solicitations online
- 1 in 3 youth have received unwanted exposure to sexual material online
- 1 in 11 youth have received harassment, threatening, or other offensive behavior directed at them online

The increase in exposure to unwanted sexual material occurred despite the increased use of filtering, blocking and monitoring software in the households of youth Internet users. Over 55% of parents and guardians with home Internet access now have some type of protective software on their computers, compared to 33% in 2000. Churches and schools also showed marked increases in the installation of filtering and blocking software during the same period.

While there was a slight decrease in the number of unwanted sexual solicitations online (13%, down from 19%), the number of aggressive solicitations (where solicitors made or attempted to make office contact with the youth) increased during the five year periods compared. However, the number of youth who communicated online with someone they did not know in person dropped (34% down from 40%), a positive sign that educational efforts are working.

The number of reported incidents to law enforcement or Internet service providers declined from 2000 to 2005, even as youth Internet users admitted to having offensive episodes that were not disclosed. At the same time, harassment, threatening and offensive behaviors were on the increase, especially in social chat rooms and other Internet youth groups.

The new numbers show that we have made some progress, but we still have a long way to go. It also shows the Internet remains a dangerous place for many, especially unsupervised youth who venture into social chat rooms and engage in unmonitored Internet forums or social groups. While sexual solicitation remains a concern, there has been a marked increase in the number of harassing incidents online, leading to offline escalation of violence.

Parents, educators, and communities need to do more to combat the growing plague of online predation and cyberbullying. Danger awareness training is paramount, as youth often don't realize they are making themselves easy prey for a predator or bully until it is too late.

The Kid-Safe Network is a proactive non-profit groups that offers a number of educational workshops and seminars for youth (of all ages), parents and community leaders to help address these concerns. We are available to speak to schools, churches, civic & community groups at no charge. We also offer self-defense clinics for youth and women, with an emphasis on predator awareness and defensive countermeasures. John Terry, NSA Regional Director, can be reached at 479-968-1708 or rivervalleykidsafe@imga.com.

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