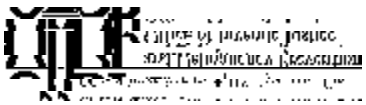

Online Victimization:

A Report on the Nation's Youth

Online Victimization:

A Report on the Nation's Youth

BY THE CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN RESEARCH CENTER

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Foreword

I have long been aware of the misuse of the Internet to prey upon children and consider it to be a serious problem that requires action by legislators, families, communities, and law enforcement. While we have made some strides in helping to prevent such victimization, the results of this survey, *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, shows that we have not done enough. Exposure to unwanted sexual material, solicitation, and harassment were frequently reported by the children interviewed for this study. These results call for a more aggressive prevention plan. While I strongly believe in the power of the Internet to provide valuable information for all ages, I do believe that children need extra attention and guidance as they venture online, because they, more than any other group of the population, are most vulnerable to Internet deceptions.

Congress has already taken action through legislation such as the Child Online Privacy Protection Act to help safeguard children from unsavory advertising practices and the registration of personal information without parental consent. Additionally, numerous private and public organizations have implemented Internet safety campaigns including pamphlets, web sites, and public-service announcements to educate children about safe Internet use. However, the growing evidence of the criminal misuse of cyberspace to target and physically victimize children is alarming to me as a parent and legislator. As detailed in this report, the risks to children, particularly teenagers, in cyberspace include exposure to

- Unwanted sexual solicitations and approaches
- Unwanted sexual material
- Threatening and offensive behavior directed at them

As Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies, my colleagues and I have been working with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) to address these threats through a three-pronged strategy that helps to

- Prevent child victimization in cyberspace through aggressive education programs directed toward parents and children. NCMEC has reached into millions of homes and classrooms with its Internet safety pamphlets and mouse pads with online rules for safety. The message for parents focuses upon strong parental involvement in their children's lives and increasing parental knowledge and awareness about computers and the Internet.
- Advocate for parental assistance through the development of technology tools and access controls. Parents should make informed decisions about utilizing these blocking and filtering software tools in their homes.
- Support aggressive law enforcement directed against those who use the Internet for criminal purposes. In addition to being reprehensible, child pornography and the enticing, luring, or seducing of children online is unlawful and strict enforcement of our laws is necessary to deter these crimes.

Congress has implemented this strategy by enhancing federal law-enforcement resources such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Innocent Images Task Force and the U.S. Customs Service's CyberSmuggling Unit, both of which have successful records of investigating and arresting online predators. On the state and local level, law-enforcement officers now have the opportunity to receive specialized

training in investigating online crimes against children at NCMEC's Jimmy Ryce Law Enforcement Training Center. The Protecting Children Online training will soon be expanded to include a course for state and local prosecutors who are working in the area of online child sexual exploitation. Additionally, through the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Congress has provided for 30 Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task force units. Spread throughout the country, these units are set up to focus on child sexual exploitation online.

One of the most important tools for law-enforcement personnel and families is the development of NCMEC's CyberTipline. In working with NCMEC on these issues, I foresaw a need for a simple way for individuals to report child sexual exploitation to the people who knew what to do with the information. In March of 1998, that need was fulfilled by the launch of the CyberTipline. This online reporting resource bridges the gap between those who wish to report crimes online and the law-enforcement agencies that need this information. I am proud to have helped with the development of the CyberTipline, a resource that has initiated numerous investigations and arrests of child predators.

Although Congress has responded with a strong message of intolerance of online predators, we cannot be effective unless we have information regarding the number of children victimized on the Internet and the various ways in which they are approached. Recognizing this need for information, Congress asked NCMEC to conduct a study in conjunction with the University of New Hampshire to identify the threats, incidence rates, and victim responses to online predators and illegal content. *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth* is a starting point in better understanding what our children are facing online.

The best way to preserve the positive uses of the Internet is to ensure that it is not a sanctuary for pedophiles, child pornographers, and others who prey upon children. I am committed to assisting law-enforcement personnel fight these crimes and inform parents about available resources to help them protect their own children. By ensuring that law-enforcement personnel and families have the necessary tools and knowledge to counter misuse, the Internet will continue to be a powerful source of education, entertainment, and communication. Together, we must aggressively enforce a "zero tolerance" policy regarding online victimization of children.

I would like to thank NCMEC staff members for their work on this much-needed report and their leadership in helping to safeguard all youth. My sincere appreciation is also extended to Dr. David Finkelhor and his colleagues, Kimberly J. Mitchell and Janis Wolak, at the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. Their efforts will help legislators, families, and law-enforcement personnel better understand and deal with this threat to children in an effective, appropriate manner.

Judd Gregg
Chairman
U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies

Message

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children believes the Internet holds tremendous potential for our nation's youth. We have used web technology to change the way we search for missing children. Our web site, www.missingkids.com, receives 3 million "hits" per day, and has become the world's primary missing-children search tool. Today NCMEC instantly transmits images of and information about missing children throughout the United States and around the world, bringing more children home than ever before. We are among the most outspoken advocates of cyberspace and have urged parents and children to explore and take advantage of its incredible benefits.

Yet, the Internet does hold perils for youth. In March 1998 FBI Director Louis Freeh and I testified before a U.S. Senate Appropriations Subcommittee about the risks to children on the Internet. I spoke anecdotally, cited cases NCMEC had worked or knew about, reported on our efforts to address this seemingly rapidly growing problem, and highlighted the increasing number of arrests and convictions. Yet, I testified that I was not aware of any meaningful empirical research addressing the true nature and extent of the risks faced by so many youth online.

Congress listened and acted. In its FY1999 Appropriations Bill, Congress directed NCMEC to undertake the first national survey on the risks faced by children on the Internet, focusing upon unwanted sexual solicitations and pornography. Our mandate was to examine the problem and provide a base-line understanding of the risks in order to help policy makers, law enforcement, and families better understand the risks and respond effectively.

The study reported here provides the first scientifically based window on some of these risks. It presents a picture of young people who are confronted with offensive, upsetting, and potentially dangerous Internet encounters. It poses the challenge of how we can clean up the cyberspace environment where our youth are going to go increasingly to play and learn. It is a call for more study and action.

In light of the effusion of unwanted sexual solicitations directed toward young people and documented in this report, one of the most important things we still need to track is the growth in the number of young people whose Internet contacts turn into real-life sex crimes. Through our CyberTipline and close working relationships with federal, state, and local law enforcement, we are able to provide an unsystematic estimate on the number of "traveler cases" in 1999. These are cases in which a child or adult traveled to physically meet with someone he or she had first encountered on the Internet.

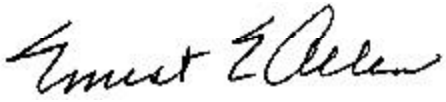
We were able to identify 785 cases including 302 from the FBI, 272 from local law enforcement, 186 from our own NCMEC reports, and 25 from news articles. Some of these may be duplicate cases, but there are certainly many others that we did not find out about and were not reported to law enforcement. It is our hope that this first report about online victimization will be followed by a scientifically based, national incidence study of these "traveler" cases so that we can truly understand this most serious part of the spectrum of the problem.

As we contemplated the challenge of the kind of study presented here, we sought to identify and involve the most credible, respected social-science researcher in the field. Thus, we were pleased when one of the nation's leading researchers on child-victimization issues, Dr. David Finkelhor and his staff at the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire agreed to take on the task.

Since 1980 Dr. Finkelhor has been a well-known national authority on child sexual abuse and was also one of those responsible for carrying out the first *National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children* (*NISMART*) for the U.S. Department of Justice. That study, like this one, helped to cast light on a number of child-welfare problems that were poorly understood and much disputed at the time.

The extraordinary work of Dr. Finkelhor and his colleagues as represented by this first national research about online victimization of youth represents a valuable addition to our knowledge and awareness of this difficult, complex problem.

We are grateful to the Honorable Judd Gregg, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies, and his colleagues for their concern, commitment, and leadership. This report is a first step, but it is a vital step that teaches us much more about what youth are facing and encountering on the Internet today. It provides a critical base of knowledge so that we can act, doing far more to ensure that we make the Internet the safest it can be for every child and family.



Ernest E. Allen
President and Chief Executive Officer
National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

Introduction

The Internet is an exciting new territory for many young people. Nearly 24 million youth ages 10 through 17 were online regularly in 1999, and millions more are expected to join them shortly. They go there to learn, play, meet people, and explore the world. But stories from law-enforcement officials, parents, and young people themselves suggest that not every online adventure is a happy one. The Internet has a seamier side that young people seem to be encountering with great frequency.

This national survey confirms many of the stories. Large numbers of young people are encountering sexual solicitations they did not want, sexual material they did not seek, and people who threatened and harassed them in a variety of ways. While many are able to glide past these encounters as mere litter on the information super highway, some experience them as real collisions with a reality they did not expect and were distressed to find. Some of these young people report being upset and afraid in the wake of their encounters and have elevated symptoms of stress and depression.

This report describes the variety of disconcerting experiences young Internet users say they have online and ways they react. It also provides a window into how families and young people are addressing matters of danger and protection on the Internet. Some of the news is reassuring. At the same time, it suggests that the seamy side of the Internet spills into the lives of an uncomfortably large number of youth and relatively few families or young people do much about it. It highlights a great need for private and public initiatives to raise awareness and provide solutions.

Nothing in this report contradicts the increasingly well-documented fact that youth and their families are excited about the Internet and its possibilities. They are voting for the Internet with their fingers and pocket books, even as they are aware of some of its drawbacks. But because it is destined to play such an important role in the lives of those growing up today, the question of how to temper some of the drawbacks of this revolutionary medium is worthy of thorough consideration now at the dawn of its development.

Report Statistical Highlights

Based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,501 youth ages 10 to 17 who use the Internet regularly

- Approximately one in five received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet **in the last year**.
- One in thirty-three received an **aggressive** sexual solicitation — a solicitor who asked to meet them somewhere; called them on the telephone; sent them regular mail, money, or gifts.
- One in four had an unwanted exposure to pictures of naked people or people having sex **in the last year**.
- One in seventeen was threatened or harassed.
- Approximately one quarter of young people who reported these incidents were distressed by them.
- Less than 10% of sexual solicitations and only 3% of unwanted exposure episodes were reported to authorities such as a law-enforcement agency, an Internet service provider, or a hotline.
- About one quarter of the youth who encountered a sexual solicitation or approach told a parent. Almost 40% of those reporting an unwanted exposure to sexual material told a parent.
- Only 17% of youth and approximately 10% of parents could name a specific authority (such as the FBI, CyberTipline, or an Internet service provider) to which they could make a report, although more said they had "heard of" such places.
- In households with home Internet access, one third of parents said they had filtering or blocking software on their computer at the time they were interviewed.

The survey suggests that youth encounter a substantial quantity of offensive episodes, some of which are distressing and most of which are unreported. A comprehensive strategy to respond to the problem would aim to reduce the quantity of offensive behavior, better shield young people from its likely occurrence, increase the level of reporting, and provide more help to youth and families to protect them from any consequences.

What is Online Victimization?

People can be victimized online in many ways. In the *Youth Internet Safety Survey* we asked about three kinds of victimization that have been prominent in discussions of youth and the Internet — sexual solicitation and approaches, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment.

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 E-mail links.

Harassment: Threats or other 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.

What is the *Youth Internet Safety Survey*?

- A telephone survey of a representative national sample of 1,501 young people, ages 10 through 17, who use the Internet regularly
- "Regular Internet use" was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past six months at home, school, a library, or some other place
- Parents or guardians were interviewed first for about 10 minutes
- With parental consent, young people were interviewed for about 15 to 30 minutes
- Care was taken to preserve privacy and confidentiality during the youth interview
- Youth participants received $10 checks and information about Internet safety
- The interviews took place between August 1999 and February 2000
- Topics covered in the interviews included
  - Experiences of sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment via the Internet and reactions to those experiences
  - The nature of friendships formed over the Internet
  - Knowledge of Internet safety practices among young Internet users and their parents or guardians
  - Assessment of factors that might make some young people more vulnerable than others to sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment via the Internet
- Youth survey participants were
  - 53% males, 47% females
  - 73% non-Hispanic white, 10% African-American, 3% American Indian or Alaskan native, 3% Asian, 2% Hispanic white, 7% other, 2% did not answer

Intro-1. Youth and Household Characteristics[1] (N=1,501)

Characteristic	% All Youth
Age of Youth	
• 10	4%
• 11	8%
• 12	11%
• 13	15%
• 14	16%
• 15	18%
• 16	17%
• 17	13%
Sex of Youth	
• Male	53%
• Female	47%
Race of Youth	
• Non-Hispanic White	73%
• African-American	10%
• American Indian or Alaskan Native	3%
• Asian	3%
• Hispanic White	2%
• Other	7%
• Don't Know/Refused	2%
Marital Status of Parent/Guardian	
• Married	79%
• Divorced	10%
• Single/Never Married	5%
• Living With Partner	1%
• Separated	2%
• Widowed	2%
Youth Lives With Both Biological Parents	64%
Highest Level of Completed Education in Household	
• Not a High School Graduate	2%
• High School Graduate	21%
• Some College Education	22%
• College Graduate	31%
• Post College Degree	22%
Annual Household Income	
• Less than $20,000	8%
• $20,000 to $50,000	38%
• More than $50,000 to $75,000	23%
• More than $75,000	23%
Type of Community	
• Small Town	28%
• Suburb of Large City	21%
• Rural Area	20%
• Large Town (25,000 to 100,000)	15%
• Large City	14%

[1] All the data in this table are based on questions asked of the parent/guardian with the exception of the information on race.
Note: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

Intro-2. Youth Internet Use Patterns (N=1,501)

Description	% All Youth
Location(s) Youth Spent Time on the Internet in Past Year[1]	
• Home	74%
• School	73%
• Other Households	68%
• Public Library	32%
• Other Place	5%
Last Time Youth Used Internet	
• Past Week	76%
• Past 2 Weeks	10%
• Past Month or Longer	14%
Number of Hours Youth Spends on Internet on a Typical Day When Online	
• 1 Hour or Less	61%
• More than 1 Hour to 2 Hours	26%
• More than 2 Hours	13%
Number of Days Youth Goes on Internet in a Typical Week	
• 1 or less	29%
• 2 to 4	40%
• 5 to 7	31%

[1] Multiple responses possible.

1. Sexual Solicitations and Approaches

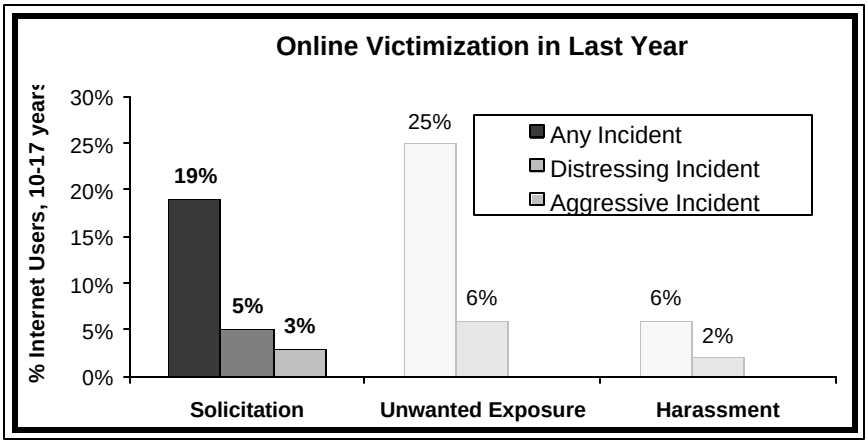
With so many young people socializing on the Internet, a key law-enforcement concern has been the access and anonymity the Internet gives to persons who might want to sexually exploit youth. The *Youth Internet Safety Survey* confirms that large numbers of youth get sexually propositioned while online, although not always in the form of the most frightening law-enforcement stereotypes.

To assess the problem of sexual exploitation the survey asked youth four kinds of questions, the results of which were aggregated under the category of sexual solicitations and approaches. The four kinds of questions were about

- Sexual approaches made to them in the past year — situations where someone on the Internet attempted to get them to talk about sex when they did not want to or asked them unwanted intimate questions
- Sexual solicitations they had received in the last year from persons over the Internet who had asked them to do sexual things they did not want to do
- Close friendships they had formed with adults they had met over the Internet including whether these had involved sexual overtures
- Invitations from Internet sources to help them run away, a ploy apparently favored by some individuals looking for vulnerable youth

Approximately one in five of regular Internet users (19%) said they had received an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach in the last year. Not all of these episodes were disturbing to the recipients; however, 5% of users (one in four of those solicited) said they had a solicitation experience in which they were very or extremely upset or afraid, cases that we termed **distressing incidents**. In addition, for 3% of regular Internet users (one in seven of all the solicitations), the Internet sexual solicitation included an attempt to contact the youth in person, over the telephone, or by regular mail (mail sent through the U.S. Postal Service). We have labeled these **aggressive** sexual solicitations. (*See* Figure 1-1, which includes, for comparison, incidence rates for other kinds of victimization discussed in subsequent chapters. When we refer to "sexual solicitations" we are including both solicitations and approaches.)

Figure 1-1



We also asked questions to assess whether youth had formed close friendships with persons they met over the Internet that had the potential to become exploitative. Three percent of the regular Internet users said they had indeed formed close friendships with adults they met over the Internet. Adults were defined as age 18 and older. Most of these friendships were between young adults and older teens, based on common interests such as computer games and **with** parental knowledge. Two youth-adult friendships, however, may have had sexual overtones, although no sexual activities occurred. There were some actual sexual relationships formed through Internet contact, but they involved teens with other teens, with both parties younger than 18 years of age.

In response to questions about running away, seven youth (0.4% of the sample) were offered assistance to runaway. One incident may have involved sexual motives on the part of an adult.

What follows is a more detailed description of the youth who were targets of the sexual solicitations and approaches and the nature of the incidents they experienced.

Who were the youth targeted for sexual solicitations and approaches?

- Girls were targeted at almost twice the rate of boys (66% versus 34%), but given that girls are often thought to be the exclusive targets of sexual solicitation, the sizable percentage of boys is important. (*See* Figure 1-2.)
- More than three quarters of targeted youth (77%) were age 14 or older. (*See* Figure 1-3.)
- Only 22% were ages 10 to 13, but this younger group was disproportionately distressed. They reported 37% of the distressing episodes, suggesting that younger youth have a harder time shrugging off such solicitations.

Figure 1-2

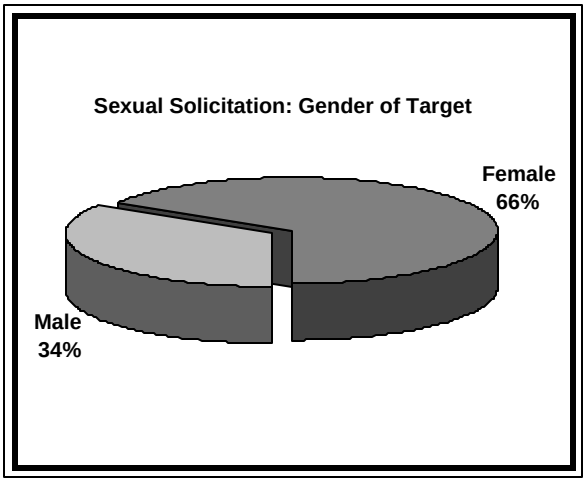
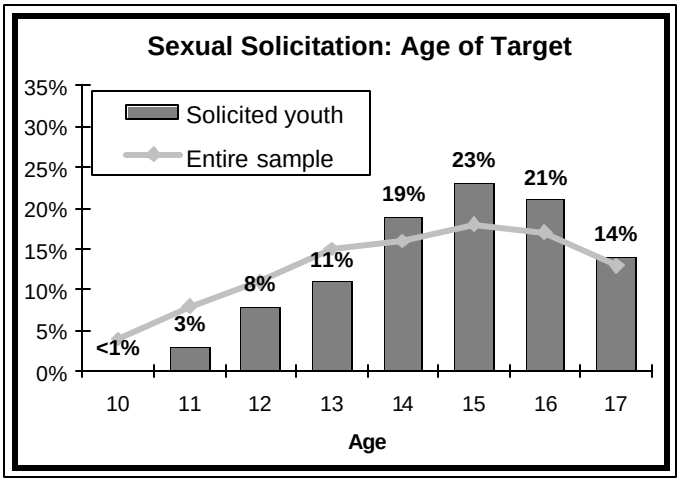


Figure 1-3

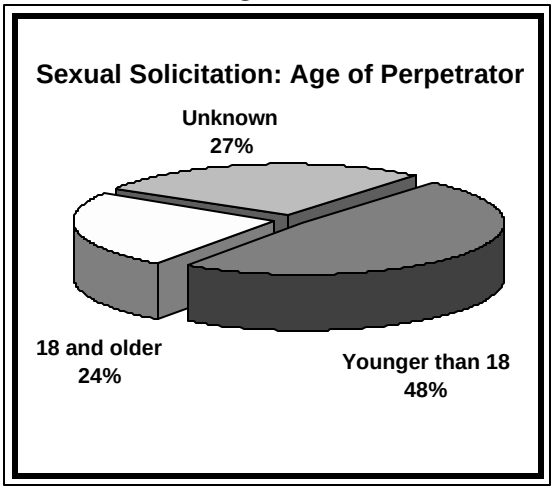


Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Who were the perpetrators of the sexual solicitations and approaches?

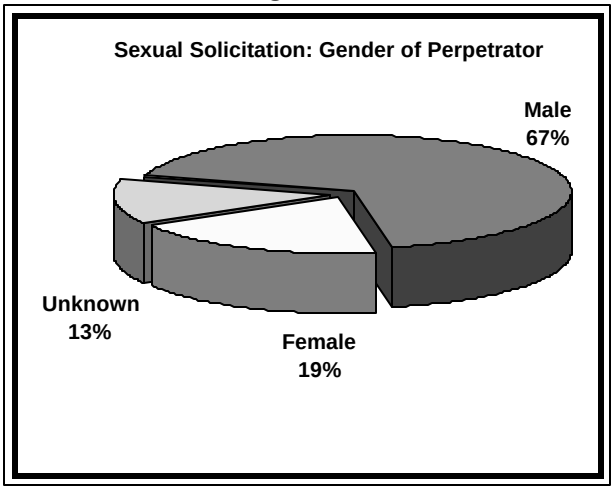
- Virtually all (97%) were persons the youth originally met online.
- Adults were responsible for 24% of sexual solicitations (*see* Figure 1-4) and 34% of the aggressive solicitations.
- Most of the adult solicitors were reported to be ages 18 to 25. About 4% of all solicitors were known to be older than 25.
- Juveniles made 48% of the overall and 48% of the aggressive solicitations.
- Slightly more than two-thirds of the solicitations and approaches came from males. (*See* Figure 1-5.)
- One-quarter of the aggressive episodes came from females.
- In 13% of instances, the youth knew where the solicitor lived. Youth stated the solicitor lived nearby (within a one hour drive or less) in only 4% of incidents.

Figure 1-4



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Figure 1-5



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Thus, not all of the sexual solicitors on the Internet fit the media stereotype of an older, male predator. Many are young and some are women. It must be kept in mind, given the anonymity the Internet provides, that individuals may easily hide or misrepresent themselves. In a large percentage of cases (27%), youth did not know the age of the person making the overture. In 13% of cases the gender was unknown. In almost all of the cases where the youth gave an age or gender for a perpetrator, the youth had never met the perpetrator in person, thus leaving the accuracy of the identifying information in question.

What happened?

- Based on the descriptions given to interviewers, many of the sexual solicitations appear to be propositions for "cybersex" — a form of fantasy sex, which involves interactive chat-room sessions where the participants describe sexual acts and sometimes disrobe and masturbate.
- In 70% of incidents the youth were at home when they were solicited, and in 22% of incidents the youth were at someone else's home.

- In 65% of incidents, the youth met the person who solicited them in a chat room; in 24% of episodes the meeting occurred through Instant Messages.
- In 10% of incidents, the perpetrators asked to meet the youth somewhere, in 6% the youth received regular mail, in 2% a telephone call, in 1% money or gifts. In one instance, the youth received a travel ticket. These were the incidents we labeled aggressive solicitations.
- In most incidents, the youth ended the solicitations, using a variety of strategies like logging off, leaving the site, or blocking the person.

Testimony From Youth

- A 13-year-old girl said that someone asked her about her bra size.
- A 17-year-old boy said someone asked him to "cyber" meaning to have cybersex. The first time this happened he didn't know what cybersex was. The second time it happened he "just said, no."
- A 14-year-old girl said that men who claimed to be 18 or 20 sent her Instant Messages asking for her measurements and other questions about what she looked like. She was 13 when this happened, and the men knew her age.
- A 12-year-old girl said people told her sexual things they were doing and asked her to play with herself.
- A 15-year-old girl said an older man kept "bothering" her. He asked her if she was a virgin and wanted to meet her.
- A 16-year-old girl said a man would talk to her about sexual things he wanted to do to her and suggest places he would like to meet her.
- A 13-year-old boy said a girl asked him how big his privates were and wanted him to "jack off."
- Another 13-year-old boy said a man sent him a drawing of a man having sex with a dog. The man said it was a picture of him.

How did the youth respond to the episodes?

- In almost half of incidents (49%), the youth did not tell anyone about the episode. Even when the episode was aggressive, youth did not tell in 36% of incidents.
- In 24% of incidents the youth told a parent, and in 29% the youth told a friend or sibling.
- Only 10% were reported to an authority like a teacher, an Internet service provider, or law-enforcement agency. Even with aggressive episodes, only 18% were reported to an authority.

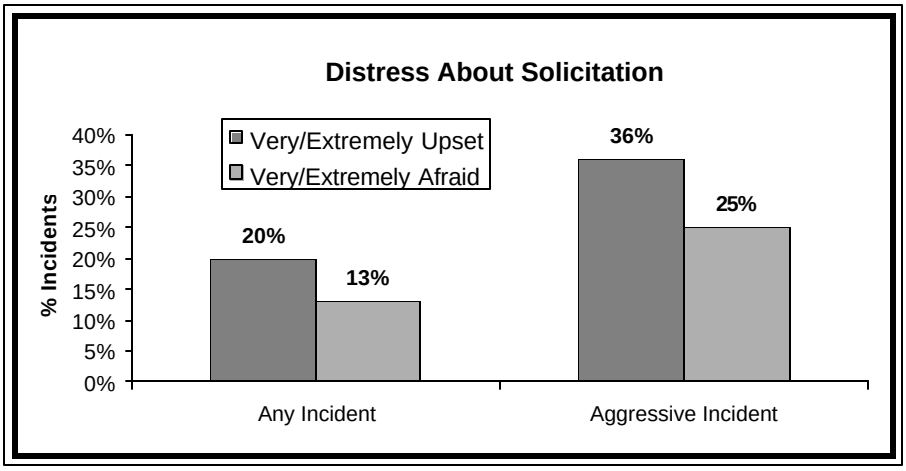
It is remarkable that so few of the episodes of sexual solicitation, even those that were distressing and/or aggressive, prompted the youth to confide in someone or make a report to an authority. Some of this probably reflects the fact that in some cases the youth were not that alarmed. Many probably did not know or doubted that anything could be done. But some of it may reflect embarrassment or shame, because the youth may have believed they had gone to places on the Internet that parents, law-enforcement officials, or even friends would disapprove of. Some may have been concerned that their access to the Internet would be restricted if they told a parent about an incident.

How did the incident affect the youth?

- In 75% of incidents, youth had no or only minor reactions, saying they were **not** very upset or afraid in the wake of the solicitation.
- In 20% of incidents, youth were very or extremely upset and in 13% very or extremely afraid. (*See* Figure 1-6.)
- In 36% of the aggressive solicitations, youth were very or extremely upset and in 25% very or extremely afraid.
- In 17% of incidents, youth were very or extremely embarrassed. This was true in 32% of aggressive incidents.
- In one-quarter of incidents, youth reported feeling at least one symptom of stress "more than a little" or "a lot" in the days right after the incident.
- The aggressive episodes were more distressing with at least one symptom of stress reported in 43% of episodes.
- 17% of the youth who were solicited had five or more symptoms of depression at the time we interviewed them, twice the rate of depressive symptoms in the overall sample.

Most of the youth who were solicited appeared to brush off the encounter, treating it as a minor annoyance. Nonetheless, there was a core group of youth who experienced high levels of upset and fear and for whom the experience may have provoked stress responses and even depressive symptoms. It is reassuring that most solicited youth are not affected. But given the large proportions solicited, the group with the strongly negative reactions is substantial.

Figure 1-6



Are youth forming risky Internet friendships with adults?

A key law-enforcement concern is whether adults in particular try to use the Internet to form friendships with youth, which they then transform into sexual relationships. To assess the dangers of such relationships, the survey asked about friendships formed through the Internet.

Many youth, 16% of the regular Internet users, report forming close online friendships with people they had met online. "Close friendship" was defined as a relationship with "someone you could talk to online about things that were real important to you." These close friendships were predominantly with other youth. Just 3% of youth had formed a close friendship with an adult they met on the Internet. The youth involved in these friendships were almost exclusively 15 years of age or older. Girls were somewhat more likely than boys (59% versus 41%) to have formed a close online friendship with an adult.

The adult Internet friends were also both males and females, mostly in the young adult age group, 18 to 25. The youth typically met them in chat rooms where they shared similar interests, particularly computer role-playing games, but popular music, dancing, and sports were also mentioned. In most of these friendships (69%), there had been some contact between the adult and youth outside of the Internet, mostly over the telephone or through regular mail. Parents knew of approximately three-quarters of these friendships. In almost a third of the youth-adult friendships, the youth actually met the adult in person, usually in a public place with a friend present. Parents knew about one third of these meetings.

Testimony From Youth

- A 17-year-old girl became close to a woman in her forties. They met in a chat room devoted to a self-help group. Her parent knew, and there was no offline contact.
- A 15-year-old boy became friends with a young man when he designed a web page for the man's music group. They met in person. The boy's parents did not know about this friendship or the meeting.
- A 17-year-old boy described a relationship with a woman in her late twenties as "romantic," but not sexual. They never met.
- A 16-year-old girl became close to a man in his thirties who traveled to meet her. They met in a public place. He wanted to spend the night with her, but she refused.

On the key question of interest to parents and law-enforcement officials regarding sexual contact, **two** of the close friendships with adults (both described above) may have had sexual aspects. One was the romantic relationship between a 17-year-old male and the woman in her late twenties. His parents knew about the relationship. The second friendship involved a man in his thirties who traveled to meet a 16-year-old girl. While she stated the relationship was not sexual, he did want to spend the night with her.

The survey presents a complex picture about Internet relationships. Many young people are forming close friendships through the Internet, and some are forming close friendships with adults. Most such relationships appear to have no taint of sexual exploitation and appear to be positive and healthy. The fact that our survey found few sexually oriented relationships between youth and adults does not mean they never occur. They certainly do occur, but probably at a level too infrequent to be detected by a survey of this size. They seem to be few in a much larger set of seemingly benign friendships.

From a prevention point of view, this means that many simple cautions — don't form friendships with people you don't know, don't form relationships with adults, or don't have lunch with people you meet on the Internet — are unlikely to be seen as realistic, particularly by older teens. The exhortation to tell parents about Internet friends seems sound, but for many older teens, this is also not likely to be practiced universally.

Probably the best approach, based on the findings here, is simply to remind youth that people they meet may have ulterior motives and hidden agendas. The caution to first meet someone from the Internet in a safe, public, or supervised place and to alert others (family or friends) about such a meeting, seems something that teens may be more likely to actually put into practice.

Young people may come to consider Internet friendships as one of the great resources the Internet provides. It may be important for prevention educators to acknowledge this as they try to be a credible source of useful information about safety practices.

Are youth being solicited to run away by potentially predatory adults?

Another situation of concern to law-enforcement authorities has been youth who are encouraged to run-away from home by persons they meet over the Internet. Seven youth, or a small 0.4% of the sample, revealed such an episode. In two instances the episodes involved communications from teenaged friends or acquaintances. Five instances involved encouragement to run away from people not known to the youth. In two instances these unknown people were identified as teens; in two instances they were identified as adults in their thirties; in the fifth instance, the age of the person was unknown.

A 12-year-old girl reported an incident with a person identified as a young teenaged boy. The boy encouraged her to run away and said it would make things "better." A 16-year-old boy said he was talking to a man in his thirties about problems the boy was having with his family. The man suggested he run away and offered him a place to stay. Both of these episodes were disclosed to parents and reported either to a law-enforcement agency or an Internet service provider. Four of the seven incidents were not disclosed to parents or authorities. Three were disclosed to parents.

Summary

Sexual solicitations and approaches occur to approximately one in five regular Internet users over the course of a year. Most incidents are brief and easily deflected, but some turn out to be distressing to the recipients and some become more aggressive including offline contact or attempts at offline contact.

While some of the perpetrators of these solicitations are the older, adult men depicted in recent media stories, many of the solicitors, when their age is known, appear to be other youth and younger adults and even some women. Even among the aggressive solicitors, a surprising number appear to be young and also female. The diversity of those making sexual solicitations is an important point for prevention planners to recognize. A too narrow characterization of the threat was a problem that hampered prevention efforts in regard to child molestation a generation ago, and those responding to Internet hazards should be careful not to make the same mistake. Not all of the sexual aggression on the Internet fits the image of the sexual predator or wily child molester. A lot of it looks and sounds like the hallways of our high schools.

Perhaps the most discouraging finding about sexual solicitations is that parents and reporting authorities do not seem to be hearing about the majority of the episodes. Youth may be embarrassed. They may not know what to do. They may simply have accepted this unpleasant reality of the Internet. Any attempt to address this problem will benefit from a more open climate of discussion and reporting.

Table 1-1. Internet Sexual Solicitation of Youth (N=1,501)

Individual Characteristics	All Incidents (N=286) 19% of Youth	Aggressive Incidents (N=43) 3% of Youth	Distressing Incidents (N=72) 5% of Youth
Age of Youth			
• 10	<1%	——	——
• 11	3%	5%	10%
• 12	8%	2%	14%
• 13	11%	14%	13%
• 14	19%	12%	8%
• 15	23%	28%	24%
• 16	21%	25%	15%
• 17	14%	14%	17%
Gender of Youth			
• Female	66%	67%	75%
• Male	34%	33%	25%

Episode Characteristics	All (N=293)	Aggressive (N=44)	Distressing (N=72)
Gender of Solicitor			
• Male	67%	64%	72%
• Female	19%	25%	13%
• Don't Know	13%	11%	14%
Age of Solicitor			
• Younger Than 18 Years	48%	48%	54%
• 18 to 25 Years	20%	27%	17%
• Older Than 25 Years	4%	7%	8%
• Don't Know	27%	18%	19%
Relation to Solicitor			
• Met Online	97%	100%	96%
• Knew in Person Before Incident	3%	——	3%
Youth Knew Where Person Lived	**13%**	**29%**	**17%**
• Person Lived Near Youth (1 hour drive or less)	4%	11%	7%
Location of Computer When Incident Occurred			
• Home	70%	66%	51%
• Someone Else's Home	22%	27%	36%
• School	4%	2%	5%
• Library	3%	5%	4%
• Some Other Place	1%	——	1%
Place on Internet Incident First Happened			
• Chat Room	65%	52%	60%
• Using Instant Messages	24%	36%	26%
• Specific Web Page	4%	7%	7%
• E-mail	2%	2%	1%
• Game Room, Message Board, Newsgroup, or Other	3%	——	2%
• Don't Know/Refused	2%	2%	1%

Episode Characteristics	(N=293)	(N=44)	(N=72)
Forms of Offline Contact[1, 2]			
• Asked to Meet Somewhere	10%	66%	20%
• Sent Regular Mail	6%	39%	9%
• Called on Telephone	2%	14%	4%
• Came to House	<1%	2%	——
• Gave Money, Gifts, or Other Things	1%	5%	1%
• Bought Plane, Train, or Bus Ticket	<1%	2%	——
• None of the Above	84%	——	70%
How Situation Ended			
• Logged Off Computer	28%	25%	35%
• Left Site	24%	16%	22%
• Blocked Perpetrator	14%	25%	17%
• Told Them to Stop	13%	11%	5%
• Changed Screen Name, Profile, or E-mail Address	5%	13%	13%
• Stopped Without Youth Doing Anything	4%	9%	5%
• Called Police or Other Authorities	1%	2%	3%
• Other	20%	20%	18%
Incident Known or Disclosed to[1]			
• Friend and/or Sibling	29%	41%	32%
• Parent	24%	32%	33%
• Other Adult	4%	7%	7%
• Teacher or School Personnel	1%	2%	3%
• ISP/CyberTipline	9%	14%	11%
• Police or Other Authority	<1%	2%	1%
• Someone Else	1%	——	1%
• No One	49%	36%	37%
Distress: Very/Extremely[1]			
• Upset	20%	36%	81%
• Afraid	13%	25%	53%
Youth With No/Low Levels of Being Upset and Afraid	75%	55%	——-
Youth Was Very/Extremely Embarrassed	17%	32%	50%
Stress Symptoms (more than a little/all the time)[1, 3]			
• **At Least One of Following**	**25%**	**43%**	**60%**
• Stayed Away From Internet	20%	32%	44%
• Thought About It and Couldn't Stop	11%	27%	35%
• Felt Jumpy or Irritable	5%	20%	21%
• Lost Interest In Things	3%	5%	10%
Presence of 5 or More Depression Symptoms[4, 5]	17%	30%	24%

[1] Multiple responses possible.

[2] Only youth who did not know the solicitor prior to the incident were asked this question (N=284 for all incidents, N=44 for aggressive incidents, and N=70 for distressing incidents).

[3] These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.

[4] In the entire sample, 8% of youth (N=117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.

[5] The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.

Note: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

Table 1-2. Close Online Friendships (N=1,501)

Youth Characteristics	All Friendships (N=246) 16% of Youth	Friendships with Adults (N=39) 3% of Youth
Age of Youth		
• 10	2%	——
• 11	4%	——
• 12	5%	5%
• 13	14%	3%
• 14	15%	——
• 15	24%	18%
• 16	18%	28%
• 17	18%	46%
Gender of Youth		
• Female	52%	59%
• Male	47%	41%
Friendship Characteristics		
Where Met Online		
• Chat Room	59%	56%
• Instant Messages	22%	13%
• Game Room, Message Board, Newsgroup, Other	9%	15%
• E-mail	8%	10%
• Web Page	1%	3%
• Don't Know	1%	3%
How Met Online		
• Same Interest	64%	74%
• Through Family/Friend	32%	21%
• Getting Information	4%	5%
Gender of Online Friend		
• Female	55%	41%
• Male	44%	59%
• Don't Know	1%	——-
Age of Online Friend		
• Younger than 18 Years	83%	——
• 18 to 25 Years	13%	85%
• Older than 25 Years	2%	15%

Friendship Characteristics	All Friendships	Friendships with Adults
Forms of Offline Contact[1]		
• Sent Youth Regular Mail	58%	51%
• Called Youth on Telephone	38%	36%
• Asked Youth to Meet	24%	21%
• Came to Youth's Home	10%	10%
• Gave Youth Money or Gifts	9%	10%
• Bought Youth Travel Ticket	——	——
• None of Above	28%	31%
Parent/Guardian Aware of Friendship	74%	74%
Met Online Friend in Person	**41%**	**31%**
• Parent Knew of Meeting	25%	10%
Individual Made Youth Feel[1]		
• Uncomfortable	2%	5%
• Afraid	<1%	——-
Friendship Was "Sexual In Any Way"	2%	——-

[1] Multiple responses possible

Note: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

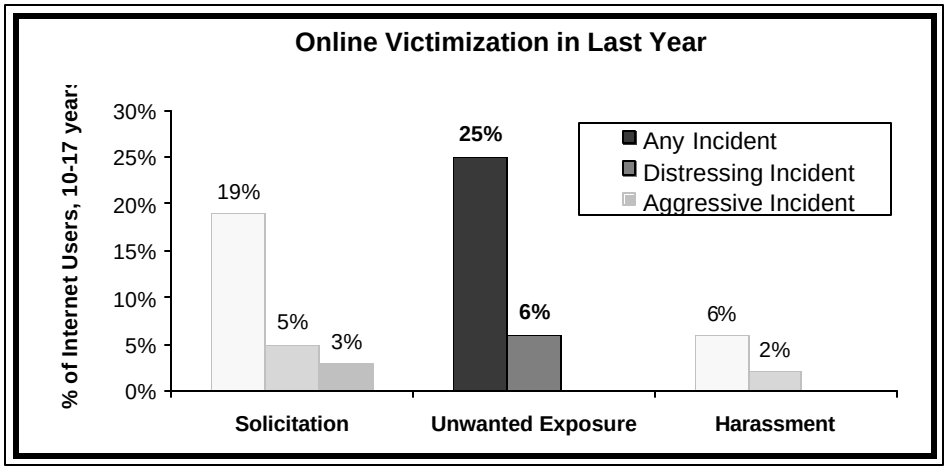
2. Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material

While it is easy to access pornography on the Internet, what makes the Internet appear particularly risky to many parents is the impression that young people can encounter pornography there inadvertently. It is common to hear stories about children researching school reports or looking up movie stars and finding themselves subjected to offensive depictions or descriptions.

In this part of the survey, we were interested in **unwanted** exposures to sexual material, those that occurred when the youth were not looking for or expecting sexual material. We were interested in material that came up while doing searches online and surfing the world wide web, as well as material that might have appeared when a youth was opening E-mail or clicking on message links. In this section on sexual material, we focus on unwanted exposure to **pictorial images** of **naked people** or **people having sex**.

A quarter (25%) of the youth had at least one unwanted exposure to sexual pictures in the last year. (*See* Figure 2-1 with incidence rates for unwanted exposure to sexual material emphasized.) Seventy-one per cent of these exposures occurred while the youth was searching or surfing the Internet, and 28% happened while opening E-mail or clicking on links in E-mail or Instant Messages.

Figure 2-1



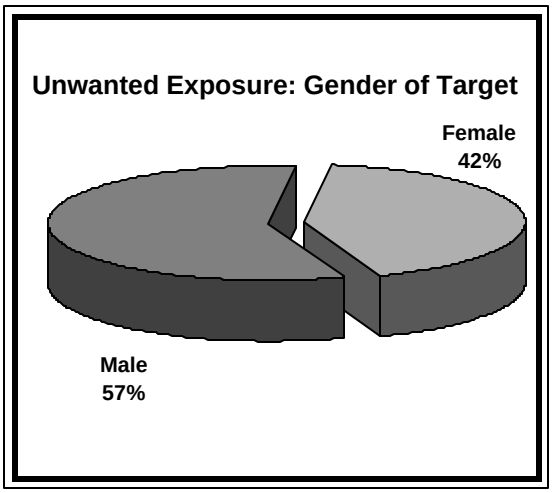
Exposure to sexual material, even when unwanted, is not necessarily upsetting to people. So we have designated a category of **distressing exposures** in which the youth said they found the exposure very or extremely upsetting. Six per cent of regular Internet users said they had a distressing exposure to unwanted sexual pictures on the Internet in the last year.

Which youth had the unwanted exposures?

- Boys outnumbered girls slightly (57% to 42%). (*See* Figure 2-2.)
- More than 60% of the unwanted exposures occurred to youth 15 years of age or older. (*See* Figure 2-3.)
- 7% of the unwanted exposures were to 11 and 12 year old youth.
- None of the 10 year olds reported unwanted exposures.

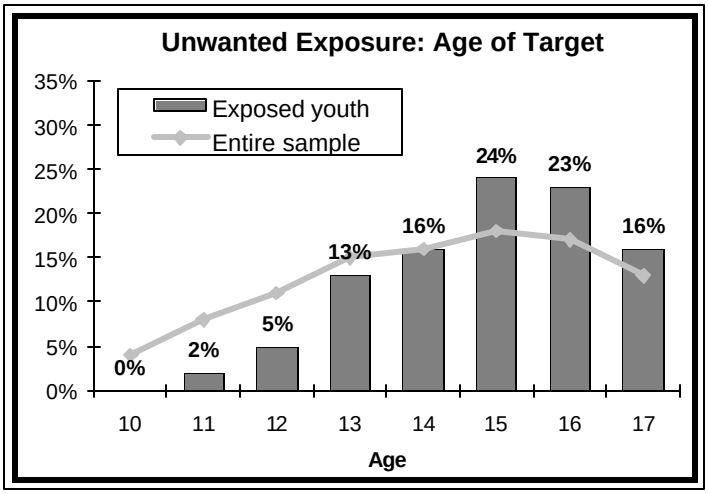
The somewhat greater exposure of boys to unwanted sexual material may reflect the reality that boys tend to allow their curiosity to draw them closer to such encounters. But the relatively small difference should not be over-emphasized. Approximately a quarter of both boys and girls had such exposures. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to say the exposure was distressing.

Figure 2-2



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Figure 2-3



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

What was the content and source of the unwanted exposure?

- 94% of the images were of naked persons
- 38% showed people having sex
- 8% involved violence, in addition to nudity and/or sex
- Most of the unwanted exposures (67%) happened at home, but 15% happened at school, and 3% happened in libraries

Unfortunately, we do not know how many of the exposures involved child pornography. Important as this question is, we had decided that our youth respondents could not be reliable informants about the ages of individuals appearing in the pictures they viewed.

For the youth who encountered the material while surfing, it came up as a result of

- Searches (47%)
- Misspelled addresses (17%)
- Links in web sites (17%)

For youth who encountered the material through E-mail

- 63% of unwanted exposures came to an address used solely by the youth
- In 93% of instances, the sender was unknown to the youth

In 17% of all incidents of unwanted exposure, the youth said they did know the site was X-rated before entering. (These were all encounters described as unwanted or unexpected.) This group of episodes was not distinguishable in any fashion from the other 83% of episodes, including the likelihood of

being distressing. Almost half of these incidents (48%) were disclosed to parents. It is not clear to what extent it was some curiosity or just navigational naivete that resulted in the opening of the sites despite prior knowledge of the illicit content.

Pornography sites are also sometimes programmed to make them difficult to exit. In fact, in some sites the exit buttons take a viewer into other sexually explicit sites. In 26% of the incidents where sexual material was encountered while surfing, youth reported they were brought to another sex site when they tried to exit the site they were in. This happened in one third of distressing incidents encountered while surfing.

Testimony From Youth

- An 11-year-old boy and a friend were searching for game sites. They typed in "fun.com," and a pornography site came up.
- A 15-year-old boy looking for information about his family's car typed "escort" into a search engine, and a site about an escort service came up.
- Another 15-year-old boy came across a bestiality site while he was writing a paper about wolves for school. He saw a picture of a woman having sex with a wolf.
- A 16-year-old girl came upon a pornography site when she mistyped "teen.com." She typed "teeen" instead.
- A 13-year-old boy who loved wrestling got an E-mail message with a subject line that said it was about wrestling. When he opened the message, it contained pornography.
- A 12-year-old girl received an E-mail message with a subject line that said "Free Beanie Babies." When she opened it, she saw a picture of naked people.

How did the youth respond to the exposure?

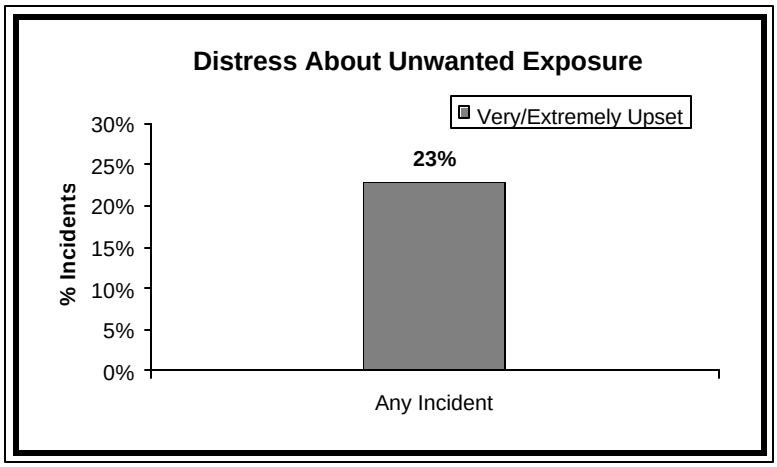
- Parents were told in 39% of the episodes.
- Youth disclosed to no one in 44% of incidents.
- In a few cases authorities were notified, most frequently a teacher or school official (3% of incidents), and Internet service providers (3%). None of these incidents were reported to a law-enforcement agency.
- Only 2% of youth who encountered sexual material while surfing said they returned later to the site of the exposure. None of the youth with distressing exposures who encountered the material while surfing returned to the site.

The fact that so many youth did not mention their exposure to anyone, even a friend, even to laugh or talk about it as an adventure, is noteworthy. It probably reflects some degree of guilt or embarrassment on the part of many youth. It might be healthier and helpful to youth if they were talking about it more.

How did the exposure affect the youth?

- 23% of youth who reported exposure incidents were very or extremely upset by the exposure. This amounts to 6% of the youth we interviewed. (*See* Figure 2-4.)
- 20% of youth were very or extremely embarrassed.
- 20% reported at least one symptom of stress.

Figure 2-4



Summary

Unwanted exposure to sexual material does appear to be widespread, occurring to a quarter of all youth who used the Internet regularly in the last year. While it is not a new thing for young people to be exposed to sexual material, the degree of sudden and unexpected exposure in an unwanted fashion may be an experience made much more common by the widespread use of the Internet. Such exposure occurs primarily to the group age 15 and older, but some youth as young as 11 had experiences to report. Even in the older group, the exposure does not merely evoke laughs or mild discomfort. About a quarter of the exposed youth, or 6% of all regular Internet users said they were very or extremely upset by an exposure. As with sexual solicitations, most exposure incidents, even the distressing ones, do not get reported to adults or authorities, although a proportion of these are disclosed to friends and siblings.

The experiences conform readily to anecdotal accounts from both youth and adult users. Unwanted exposures mostly occur when doing Internet searches, misspelling addresses, or clicking on links. More than a third of the imagery was of sexual acts, rather than simply naked people, and 8% involved some violence in addition to nudity and/or sex.

From a social-scientific view, the issues about youth exposure to unwanted sexual material are difficult to evaluate, in part, because there is almost no prior research on the matter. No one knows the effects of such exposure. The research on exposure to advertising and media violence makes it clear that media exposure can have effects. Media can affect attitudes, engender fears, and model behaviors (both pro and antisocial).

Previous research on exposure to pornography is not relevant to the many issues of concern here. That research has been done with adults and is based on an assumption of voluntary exposure. The present survey shows that in the case of unwanted exposure there are strong negative, subjective feelings for

certain youth and certain youth who manifest symptoms of stress. We do not know how long these feelings or symptoms last or what ramifications they have, but they should mobilize our concern. Questions that should be of particular interest and need attention for future investigation are

- Do any of youth so exposed have full-fledged, clinical-level traumatic reactions or other highly disturbed reactions?
- Is there any influence, traumatic or otherwise, on developing attitudes and feelings about sex?
- Do youth who have experienced unwanted exposure relate to future Internet sexual material in different ways — either more avoidant or more attracted?
- Do Internet exposures to sexual material figure negatively in family dynamics, creating conflicts or barriers in any way?

Nonetheless, for many people, the issues about youth exposure are even more basic than its effects. Whatever the effects, they would argue that people in general and young people in particular have a right to be free from unwanted intrusion of sexual material in a public forum such as the Internet. On this point, some of the constitutional debate about the Internet has concerned what kind of forum the Internet is. Is it a forum like a bookstore, where if it is signposted, people can readily stay away from the sexually explicit material if they so choose, or more like a television channel, where people are much more captive of the material that is projected at them? Clearly, the Internet has aspects of both. But the present research does suggest that, in its current form, it is not simple for those who want to avoid sexual material on the Internet to do so.

Table 2-1. Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material (N=1,501)

Individual Characteristics	All Incidents (N=376) 25% of Youth	Distressing Incidents (N=91) 6% of Youth
Age of Youth		
• 10	——	——
• 11	2%	1%
• 12	5%	5%
• 13	13%	21%
• 14	16%	18%
• 15	24%	22%
• 16	23%	15%
• 17	16%	18%
Gender of Youth		
• Male	57%	55%
• Female	42%	45%

Episode Characteristics	All (N=393)	Distressing (N=92)
Location of Computer		
• Home	67%	61%
• School	15%	16%
• Someone Else's Home	13%	16%
• Library	3%	3%
• Some Other Place	2%	3%
Type of Material Youth Saw[1]		
• Pictures of Naked Person(s)	94%	92%
• Pictures of People Having Sex	38%	42%
• Pictures That Also Included Violence	8%	9%
How Youth Was Exposed		
• Surfing the Web	71%	72%
• Opening E-mail or Clicking on an E-mail Link	28%	30%
• Youth Could Tell Site Was X-rated Before Entering	17%	12%

Surfing Exposure	All (N=281)	Distressing (N=66)
How Web Site Came Up		
• Link Came Up as Result of Search	47%	36%
• Misspelled Web Address	17%	18%
• Clicked on Link When In Other Site	17%	24%
• Other	15%	18%
• Don't Know	3%	3%
• Youth Has Gone Back to Web Site	2%	——-
• Youth Was Taken Into Another X-rated Site When Exiting the First One	26%	33%

E-mail Exposure	All (N=112)	Distressing (N=26)
• Youth Received E-mail at a Personal Address	63%	58%
• E-mail Sender Unknown	93%	96%

Episode Characteristics (Surfing & E-mail)	All (N=393)	Distressing (N=92)
Incident Known or Disclosed to[1]		
• Parent	39%	43%
• Friend and/or Sibling	30%	33%
• Another Adult	2%	2%
• Teacher or School Personnel	3%	9%
• ISP/CyberTipline	3%	4%
• Police or Other Authority	——	——
• Someone Else	1%	——
• No One	44%	39
Distress: Very/Extremely		
• Upset	23%	100%[2]
Youth With No/Low Levels of Upset	76%	——-
Youth Was Very/Extremely Embarrassed	20%	48%
Stress Symptoms (more than a little/all the time)[1, 3]		
• **At Least One of Following**	**20%**	**43%**
• Stayed Away From Internet	17%	34%
• Thought About It and Couldn't Stop	6%	16%
• Felt Jumpy or Irritable	2%	7%
• Lost Interest in Things	1%	7%
Presence of 5 or More Depression Symptoms[4, 5]	11%	15%

[1] Multiple responses possible

[2] Degree of upset was used to define this category of youth.

[3] These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.

[4] In the entire sample, 8% of youth (N=117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.

[5] The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.

Note: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

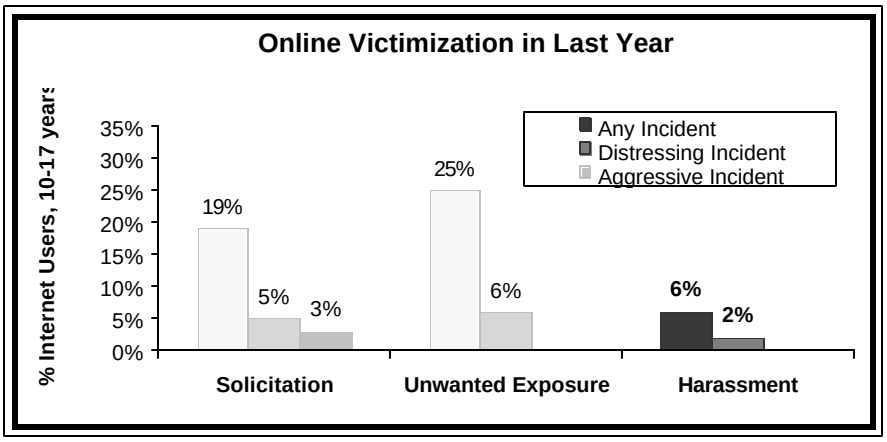
3. Harassment

Although less publicized than sexual solicitation and unwanted exposure to sexual material, youth have reported other threatening and offensive behavior directed to them on the Internet, including threats to assault or harm the youth, their friends, family, or property as well as efforts to embarrass or humiliate them. Once again, the concern of parents and other officials is that the anonymity of the Internet may make it a fertile territory for such behaviors. The survey asked youth about two kinds of situations that may have occurred in the last year.

- Feeling worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing them online
- Someone using the Internet to threaten or embarrass them by posting or sending messages about them for other people to see

Six percent of regular Internet users reported such experiences in the last year. (*See* Figure 3-1 with incidence rates for harassment emphasized.) A third of these youth, or 2% of the entire sample, said they had been very or extremely upset or afraid because of a harassment episode — the group we have labeled **distressing incidents.**

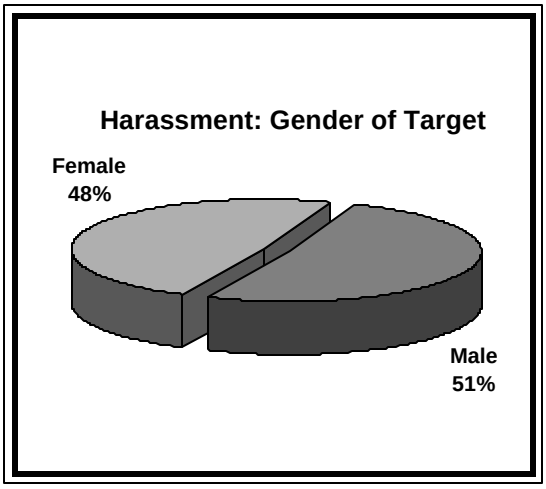
Figure 3-1



Who were the youth targeted for harassment?

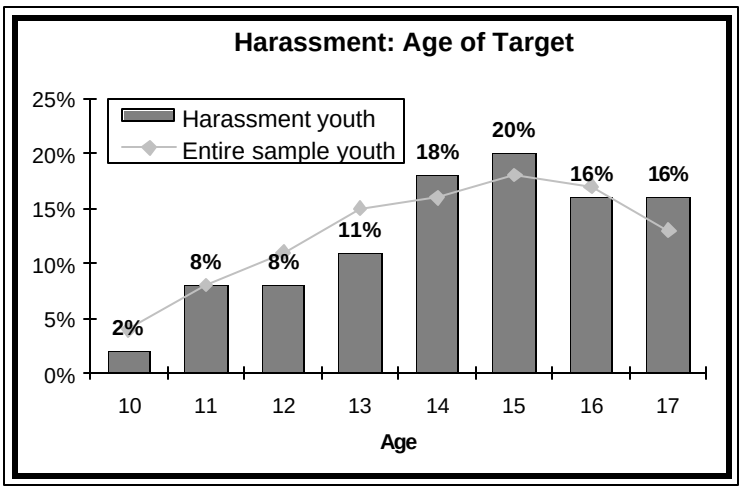
- Boys and girls were targeted about equally (51% and 48%). (*See* Figure 3-2.)
- 70% of the episodes occurred to youth 14 and older. (*See* Figure 3-3.)
- 18% of targeted youth were 10, 11, or 12.

Figure 3-2



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Figure 3-3



Note: Adds to less than 100% due to rounding and/or missing data.

Who were the harassment perpetrators?

- A majority (54%) was reported to be male, but 20% were reportedly female. In 26% of instances, the gender was unknown. (*See* Figure 3-4.)
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of harassment perpetrators were other juveniles. (*See* Figure 3-5.)
- Almost a quarter of harassment perpetrators (24%) lived near (within an hours drive of) the youth. In distressing episodes, 35% of perpetrators lived near the youth.
- In contrast to the sexual solicitation episodes where only 3% of perpetrators were known to the youth offline, 28% of the harassment episodes involved known perpetrators.

Figure 3-4

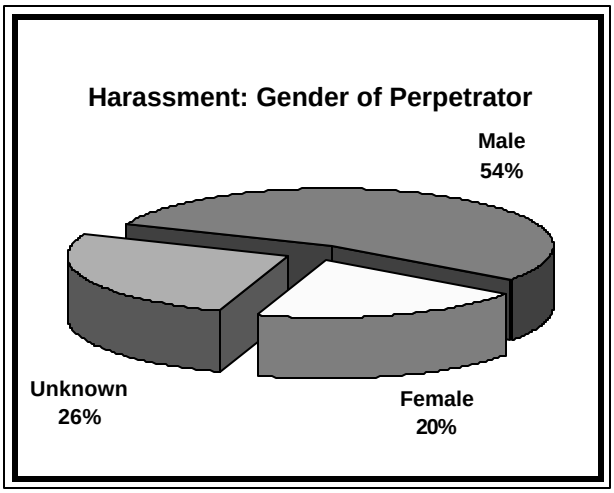
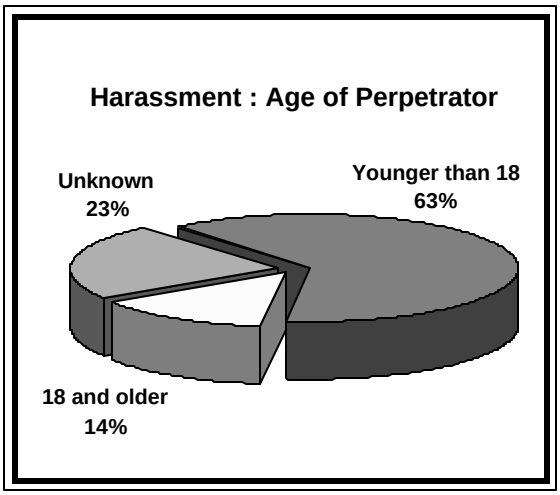


Figure 3-5



What happened?

- Slightly more than three quarters of the youth were logged on at home when the harassment was occurring.
- The harassment primarily took the form of Instant Messages (33%), chat-room exchanges (32%), and E-mails (19%).
- Of the harassment episodes involving perpetrators who were not face-to-face acquaintances of the youth, 12% included an actual or attempted contact by telephone, regular mail, or in person.

Testimony From Youth

- A 17-year-old girl said people who were mad at her made a "hate page" about her.
- A 14-year-old boy said that he received Instant Messages from someone who said he was hiding in the boy's house with a laptop. The boy was home alone at the time. He was very frightened.
- A 14-year-old girl said kids at school found a note from her boyfriend. They scanned it, posted it on the world wide web, and sent it by E-mail throughout her school.
- A 12-year-old girl said someone posted a note about her on the world wide web. The note included swear words and involved sexual name-calling.

How did the youth respond to the episodes?

- Parents were told about these episodes half the time.
- Slightly more than a third of youth told friends.
- 21% of the episodes were reported to Internet service providers, 6% to teachers, 1% to a law-enforcement agency.
- 24% of harassment incidents were undisclosed.

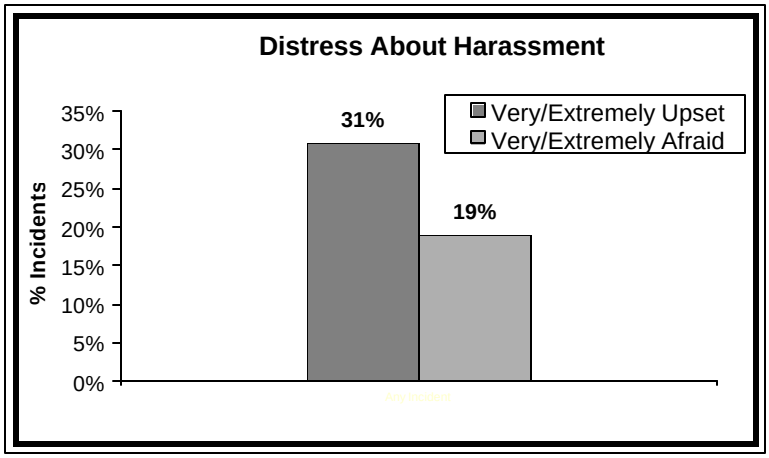
It is noteworthy that, compared to sexual solicitations and unwanted exposures, a larger proportion of the harassment episodes were reported to parents and authorities.

How did the incident affect the youth?

- 31% were very or extremely upset, and 19% were very or extremely afraid. (*See* Figure 3-6.)
- 18% were very or extremely embarrassed.
- Almost one third of the harassed youth (32%) reported at least one symptom of stress after the incident.
- Almost one half of the youth who had experienced distressing episodes exhibited at least one symptom of stress.
- 18% of the harassed youth had five or more depressive symptoms at the time of their interview, more than twice the rate for the overall sample.

Most of the harassed youth had no or only minor reactions, but an important subgroup was distressed.

Figure 3-6



Summary

Sexual offenses against youth on the Internet have received the lion's share of attention, but this survey suggests harassment deserves concern as well. Harassment does not occur as frequently as sexual solicitation or unwanted exposure to sexual material, but it is a problem encountered by a significant group of youth. The seamy side of the Internet is not all about sex, but includes plain old hostility and maliciousness as well.

An important feature of harassment is that, more than sexual solicitation, it involves people known to the youth and people known to live nearby. Certainly, some of the threatening character of these episodes stems from the fact that the targets do not feel completely protected by distance and anonymity. The harasser could actually carry out his or her threats.

Importantly, the harassed youth were substantially more likely than the sexually solicited youth to tell someone and report the episode to an authority. Nonetheless, the percentage of youth reporting harassment to authorities is still quite low, pointing to a need to publicize and educate families about available help sources.

Table 3-1. Online Harassment of Youth (N=1,501)

Individual Characteristics	All Incidents (N=95) 6% of Youth	Distressing Incidents (N=37) 2% of Youth
Age of Youth		
• 10	2%	5%
• 11	8%	8%
• 12	8%	8%
• 13	11%	11%
• 14	18%	27%
• 15	20%	13%
• 16	16%	22%
• 17	16%	5%
Gender of Youth		
• Male	51%	43%
• Female	48%	57%
Episode Characteristics	**All (N=96)**	**Distressing (N=37)**
Gender of Harasser		
• Male	54%	51%
• Female	20%	24%
• Don't Know	26%	24%
Age of Harasser		
• Younger than 18 Years	63%	65%
• 18 to 25 Years	13%	16%
• Older than 25 Years	1%	——
• Don't Know	23%	19%
Relation to Harasser		
• Met Online	72%	65%
• Knew In Person Before Incident	28%	35%
Youth Knew Where Person Lived	**35%**	**43%**
• Person Lived Near Youth (1 hour drive or less)	24%	35%
Location of Computer		
• Home	76%	81%
• Someone Else's Home	13%	5%
• School	6%	5%
• Library	1%	3%
• Some Other Place	2%	3%
• Wasn't Using Computer[1]	2%	3%
Place on Internet Incident First Happened		
• Using Instant Messages	33%	41%
• Chat Room	32%	22%
• E-mail	19%	22%
• Specific Web Page	7%	8%
• Game Room, Message Board, Newsgroup, Other	6%	5%
• Don't Know	2%	3%

Episode Characteristics	(N=96)	(N=37)
Forms of Offline Contact[2, 3]		
• Sent Regular Mail	9%	4%
• Asked to Meet Somewhere	6%	4%
• Called on Telephone	4%	——
• Came to House	1%	——
• Gave Money, Gifts, or Other Things	1%	——
• Bought Plane, Train, or Bus Ticket	——	——
• None of the Above	88%	96%
How Situation Ended		
• Logged Off	19%	22%
• Blocked that Person	17%	11%
• Left Site	13%	16%
• Told Them to Stop	11%	16%
• Stopped Without Youth Doing Anything	10%	11%
• Changed Screen Name, Profile, or E-mail Address	3%	3%
• Called Police or Other Authorities	2%	——
• Other	27%	22%
Incident Known or Disclosed to[2]		
• Parent	50%	51%
• Friend or Sibling	36%	38%
• ISP/CyberTipline	21%	24%
• Teacher or School Personnel	6%	11%
• Another Adult	1%	3%
• Police or Other Authority	1%	——
• Someone Else	4%	8%
• No One	24%	22%
Distress: Very/Extremely[2]		
• Upset	31%	81%
• Afraid	19%	49%
Youth With No/Low Levels of Being Upset and Afraid	69%	——-
Youth Were Very/Extremely Embarrassed	18%	35%
Stress Symptoms (more than a little/all the time)[2, 4]		
• **At Least One of Following**	**32%**	**49%**
• Stayed Away From Internet	23%	30%
• Thought About It and Couldn't Stop	20%	38%
• Felt Jumpy or Irritable	6%	16%
• Lost Interest in Things	3%	5%
Presence of 5 or More Depression Symptoms[5, 6]	18%	22%

[1] These youth had information posted about them online by other people.

[2] Multiple responses possible.

[3] Only youth who did not know the harasser prior to the incident were asked this question (N=69 for all incidents and N=24 for distressing incidents).

[4] These items were adapted from a psychiatric inventory of stress responses and represent avoidance behaviors, intrusive thoughts, and physical symptoms.

[5] In the entire sample, 8% of youth (N=117) reported 5 or more symptoms of depression.

[6] The values for this category are based on individual characteristics rather than episode characteristics.

Note: Categories that do not add to 100% are due to rounding and/or missing data.

4. Risks and Remedies

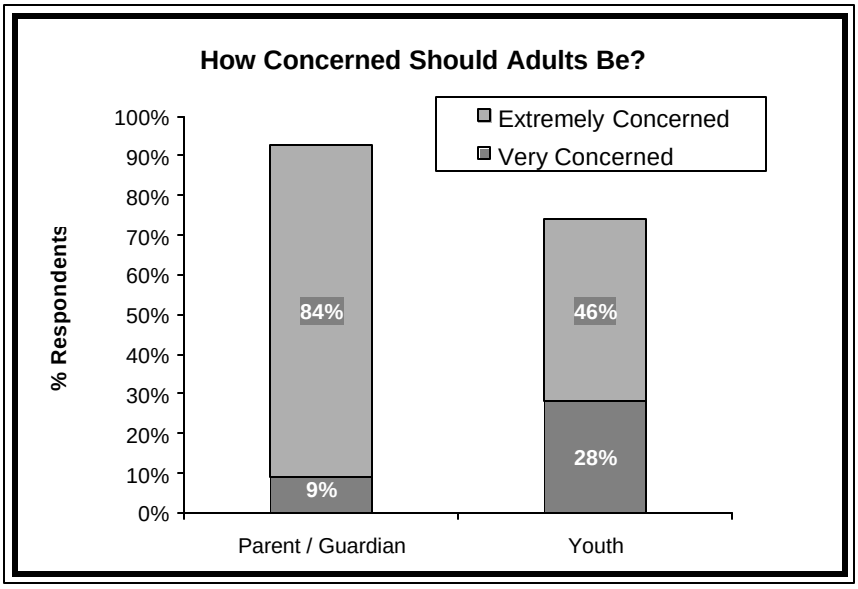
Our lack of knowledge about the dimensions and dynamics of the problems this new technology has created for young people is, of course, a barrier to devising effective solutions. But, even in the absence of knowledge, there has been no dearth of suggestions about things to do. Parents have been urged to supervise their children and talk with them about Internet perils. Youth have been urged to avoid certain risky situations. Organizations have been established to monitor and investigate suspicious episodes. Have any of these remedies been taken to heart?

The survey asked a variety of questions to find out more about the prospects for prevention. We tried to determine to what degree parents are monitoring and advising their children about Internet activities. We asked about the prevalence of Internet activities that may put youth at risk. And we asked about parent and youth knowledge about what remedies or information sources are available for them when they run into problems.

How concerned should adults be about the problem?

Parents and youth both believed that adults should be concerned about the problem of young people being exposed to sexual material on the Internet. As might be expected, parents thought adults should be more concerned than youth thought adults should be, with 84% of parents saying adults should be extremely concerned, compared to only 46% of the youth. (*See* Figure 4-1.) Some inflation of concern might be expected in a survey with this topic, but other surveys confirm that this is an issue of substantial immediacy for parents and youth.

Figure 4-1



Are parents supervising their children?

Many parents or guardians said they had supervised their child's Internet use in the past year. Most claimed to have talked to youth about such matters as giving out addresses, chatting with strangers, or going to X-rated web sites. Four out of five had rules about specific things the young person was not

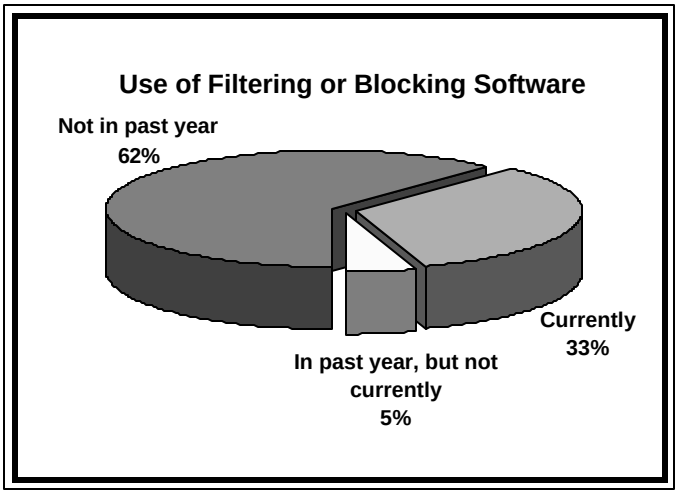
supposed to do online. Approximately four out of five also asked youth about what they did on the Internet. Since many parents might feel guilty about appearing not to have done these things, it is possible that responses to survey interviewers inflate the percentage of parents who have actually supervised their children to this extent. We also did not ask about the details or circumstances of these discussions.

Virtually all parents who had Internet access in their homes said they had looked at the computer screen on occasion to see what their child was doing. At a higher level of supervision that characterized around two-fifths of the households, parents or guardians with home Internet access reported that they checked their child's files or diskettes, required the youth to get permission before going on the Internet, or limited the amount of time the youth could spend online. In approximately three-fifths of households with home Internet access, parents or guardians checked the computer history function to find out where on the Internet the youth had been visiting.

Have families utilized blocking and filtering technology?

Thirty-three percent of households were currently using filtering or blocking software at the time of the interview. (*See* Figure 4-2.) The most common option used by far is the access control offered by America Online to its subscribers, used by 12% of the households with home Internet access, or 35% of households using filtering or blocking software. Interestingly, another 5% of the households in our sample had used some kind of filtering or blocking software during the past year, but were no longer doing so, suggesting some possible dissatisfaction with its use.

Figure 4-2



Are many youth doing *risky things* on the Internet?

We also asked questions to get a sense of how much risky behavior youth were engaging in, in spite of parental-control efforts. The percentages overall were not very large, but some of these behaviors are sensitive enough that youth may have been less than fully candid.

Only 8% admitted to going voluntarily to X-rated Internet sites. Less than 1% said they had used a credit card without permission. Only 5% had posted a picture of themselves for general viewing. Eleven percent had posted some personal information in a public Internet space, mostly their last name. Twenty-

seven percent of E-mail users had posted their E-mail address in a public place on the Internet, but this may be an underestimate since almost any posting to a bulletin board or signing on to a chat room gives a child's E-mail address this kind of exposure. Of youth who said they talked online with people they did not know in person, 12% had sent a picture to someone they met online, and 7% had willingly talked about sex online with someone they had never met in person.

Among the most common of the potentially risky behaviors was making rude or nasty comments to someone online — practiced in the past year by 14% of youth. A similar number played a joke on or annoyed someone online, mostly friends they already knew. One percent admitted to having harassed someone online.

As a measure of those who may be testing the limits most dramatically or persistently, we asked whether the youth had gotten in trouble for something they did online in the past year. Five percent had been in trouble at home, and 3% of youth who used the Internet at school had been in trouble there for online activities.

Do families and youth know about sources of help?

We noted earlier that relatively few of the Internet episodes reported by youth (solicitation, unwanted exposures to sexual material, or harassment) were reported to official sources. One possibility is that youth and their families are not familiar with places that are interested in or receptive to such reports. Almost a third of parents or guardians said they had heard of places where troublesome Internet episodes could be reported, but only approximately 10% of them could cite a specific name or authority. (*See* Figure 4-3.) Only 24% of youth stated they had heard of places to report, and only 17% could actually name a place. (*See* Figure 4-4.) Reporting the episode to an Internet service provider was the option most often thought of. For most of these households, the Internet service provider was America Online.

Figure 4-3

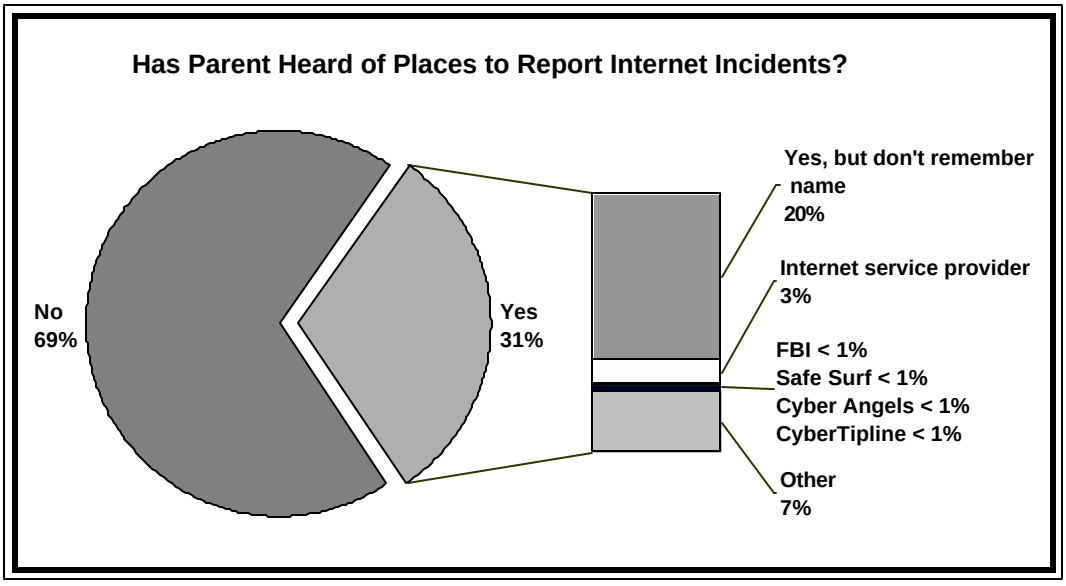
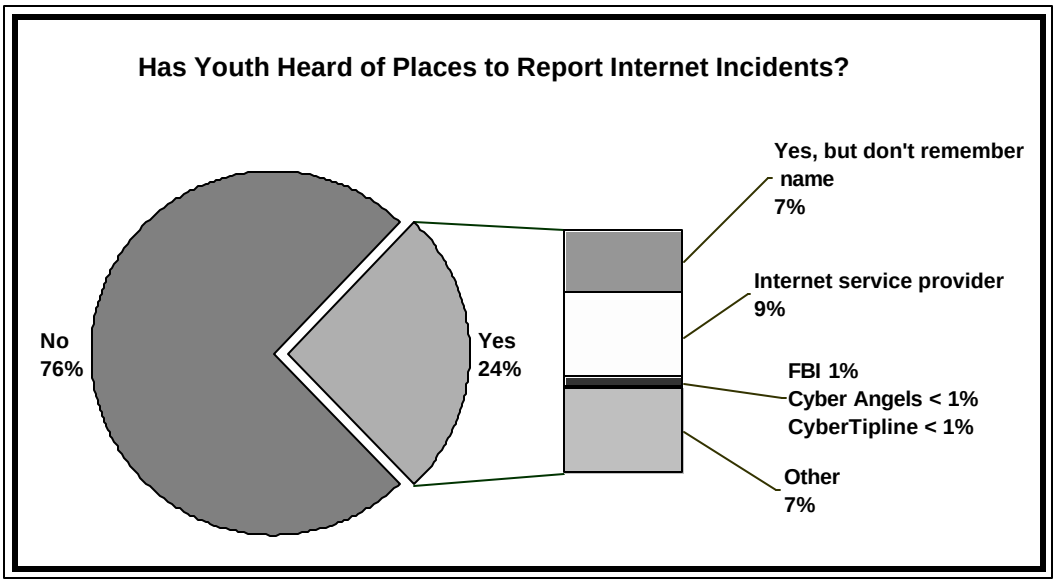


Figure 4-4



Have they heard of the CyberTipline?

Very few of the youth, parents, or guardians could think of the CyberTipline when asked a general question about possible places to report cases. When interviewers said the name "CyberTipline" and asked respondents if they knew about it, larger numbers said they had heard of it, almost 10% of the parents or guardians and 2% of the youth.

Summary

For those concerned about youth Internet safety, there is good and bad news in the survey responses about general Internet practices. While the majority of parents and guardians of Internet users say they supervise their children's online activity, there is a small segment of the population (7%) that does not. Discussions are going on in most households between adults and youth about Internet perils, but it is hard to know how detailed or effective they are. The vast majority of youth, for their part, appear to be playing it safe, and not engaging in risky online behavior. This is generally good news.

The survey, however, reveals notable problems as well. First, there does appear to be a tremendous lack of knowledge about what help sources are available to deal with offensive or disturbing Internet episodes. This may reflect the fact that parents or guardians do not feel they need to know about such sources until something bad happens. But the low level of reporting of incidents suggests that even when bad things happen, people do not make the effort to locate possible help sources. Thus, if the findings point to some area where progress needs to be made, it is in the area of alerting people about possible help sources for problematic Internet encounters.

Secondly, there is a segment of the youth population who are taking risks on the Internet such as engaging in sexual conversations, seeking out X-rated sites, posting pictures of themselves online, or harassing other Internet users. The rates are not high compared to other more conventional risky behavior like using drugs, drinking alcohol, or stealing, but they reflect a new dimension of deviance that needs to be incorporated into a larger understanding of the perils of childhood and addressed in a variety of ways.

Finally, the survey raises questions about the use of filtering and blocking software. Despite the high level of family concern about exposure to sexual material, only a minority of families had adopted the use of any software to address their concern, and some who had adopted it had discontinued its use. This may not reflect a problem. Many parents may be correct in their judgment that discussions with their children and some level of parental monitoring are adequate to manage the problem. But the lack of adoption may also reflect parental doubts about the effectiveness of the available software or a sense that its adoption would create family conflicts that they are reluctant to confront. The findings suggest we need to learn more about actual family concerns about and experiences with filtering and blocking software as a solution to their concerns about Internet safety.

Table 4-1. Parental Supervision of Internet Activities[1]

Supervision (in past year)	Parent/Guardian % Yes
Talked With Youth About (N=1,501)[2]	
• Being Careful About Chatting With Strangers on Internet	85%
• Giving Address/Telephone Number to People Meet on Internet	83%
• Going to X-rated Web Sites or Other X-rated Places	83%
• Talking Online About Very Personal Things (*e.g.*, sex)	77%
• Trying to Meet People Youth Gets to Know on Internet	73%
• Responding to Nasty/Mean Messages	72%
• None of the Above	7%
Look at Screen to See What Youth Is Doing	97%
Rules About Things Youth Is Not Supposed to Do on Internet (N=1,501)	80%
Ask Youth About What He or She Does on Internet (N=1,501)	78%
Check History Function for Sites Youth Has Visited	63%
Check Files and Diskettes	48%
Youth Must Ask Permission to Go on Internet	44%
Rule About Number of Hours Youth Can Spend on Internet	39%

[1] N=1,033 unless otherwise stated. These questions were only asked of households with home Internet access.
[2] Multiple responses possible.

Table 4-2. Risky Online Behavior (N=1,501)

Risky Online Behavior in the Past Year	All Youth % Yes
Youth Went to X-rated Sites on Purpose	8%
Talked About Sex Online With Someone Youth Never Met in Person (N=839)[1]	**7%**
• Youth Knew He or She Was Talking to an Adult	2%
• Adult Knew He or She Was Talking With a Minor	2%
Used Credit Card Online Without Permission	<1%
Posted Picture of Self for Anyone to See	5%
Sent Picture of Self to Someone Met Online (N=839)[1]	12%
Posted Some Personal Information for All to See	**11%**
• Posted Last Name	9%
• Posted Telephone Number	1%
• Posted Name of School	3%
• Posted Home Address	2%
Posted E-mail Address for Anyone to See (N=1,143)[2]	27%
Made Rude/Nasty Comments to Someone Online	14%
Played Joke or Annoyed Someone Online	**14%**
• Played Joke/Annoyed Someone Youth Knew	13%
• Played Joke/Annoyed Stranger	2%
Harassed/Embarrassed Someone Youth Was Mad at Online	**1%**
• Harassed/Embarrassed Stranger	<1%
• Harassed/Embarrassed Someone Youth Knew	1%
Youth Was In Trouble at Home for Something He or She Did Online	5%
Youth Was In Trouble at School for Something He or She Did Online (N=1,100)[3]	3%

[1] Only asked of youth who reported talking online with people they didn't know in person.
[2] Only asked of youth who reported having an E-mail address.
[3] Only asked of youth who reported using the Internet at school.

5. Major Findings and Conclusions

By providing more texture and details to our picture of the cyber-hazards facing youth, the national *Youth Internet Safety Survey* has much to contribute to current public-policy discussions about what to do to improve the safety of young people. What follows are some key conclusions based on the important findings from the survey.

1. A large fraction of youth are encountering offensive experiences on the Internet.
The percentage of youth encountering offensive experiences — 19% sexually solicited, 25% exposed to unwanted sexual material, 6% harassed— are figures for one year only. The number of youth encountering such experiences from when they start using the Internet until they are 17, a time which might include five or more years of Internet activity, would certainly be higher.

The level of offensive behavior reported in this survey might be placed in this perspective. Any workplace or commercial establishment where a fifth of all employees or clients were sexually solicited annually would be in serious trouble. What if a quarter of all young visitors to the local supermarket were exposed to unwanted pornography? Would this be tolerated? We consider these levels of offensiveness unacceptable in most contexts. But on the Internet will we simply accept it as the price for this new technology and because it is anonymous? Sadly, the Internet is not always the nice, safe, educational and recreational environment that we might have hoped for our young people.

2. The offenses and offenders are even more diverse than we previously thought.
The problem highlighted in this survey is not just adult males trolling for sex. Much of the offending behavior comes from other youth. There is also a substantial amount from females. The non-sexual offenses are numerous and quite serious too. We need to keep this diversity in mind. Sexual victimization on the Internet should not be the only thing that grabs public attention.

3. Most sexual solicitations fail, but their quantity is potentially alarming.
Based on the results of this study, it appears that several million young people ages 10 through 17 get propositioned on the Internet every year. (*See* Table 7-2.) If even some small percentage of these encounters results in offline sexual assault or illegal sexual contact— a percentage smaller than we could detect in this survey — it would amount to several thousand incidents. The good news is most young people seem to know what to do to deflect these sexual "come ons." But there are youth who may be especially vulnerable through lack of knowledge, neediness, disability, or poor judgment. The wholesale solicitation for sex on the Internet is worrisome for that reason.

4. The primary vulnerable population is teenagers.
For solicitations, as well as unwanted exposures to sexual material and harassment, most of the targets were teens, especially teens 14 and older. Thus, it is misleading to say that child molesters are moving from the playground to the living room, trading in their trench coats for digicams, as some have characterized it. Children and teenagers are different victim populations. Pre-teen children use the Internet less, in more

limited ways (Richardson, 1999; Roberts, 1999), and are less independent. It does not appear that much predatory behavior over the Internet involves conventional pedophiles targeting 8-year-old children with their modems, at least not yet. The target population for this Internet victimization is teens, and that makes prevention and intervention a different sort of challenge. Teens do not necessarily listen to what parents and other "authorities" tell them.

5. Sexual material is very intrusive on the Internet.

Large percentages of youth Internet users are exposed to sexual material when they are not looking for it, through largely innocent misspellings and opening E-mail, visiting web sites, and viewing other documents. The sex on the Internet is not segregated and signposted like in a bookstore, and it is not easy to avoid. Some heavy-duty imagery is incredibly easy to stumble upon. Apparently many people do not know this yet. They are inclined to think, "Well, I never see it, so it must be something you only get if you go looking." But youth do not have to be all that active in exploring the Internet to run across sexual material inadvertently.

6. Most youth brush off these offenses, but some are quite distressed.

Most youth are not bothered much by what they encounter on the Internet, but there is an important subgroup of youth who are quite distressed — by the exposure as well as the solicitations and harassment. We cannot assume these are just transient effects. When youth report stress symptoms like intrusive thoughts and physical discomfort, that is a warning sign. Some of this could be the psychological equivalent of a concussion, not a slight bump on the head. It may be hard to predict exactly who will get hurt. It may depend partly on things like age, prior experience — both with the Internet and sexual matters — family attitudes, the degree of surprise, and kind of exposure. Anticipating and trying to respond to negative impacts is something that needs more consideration.

7. Many youth do not tell anyone.

Nearly half of the solicitations were not disclosed to anyone. Some of this non-disclosure is certainly due to embarrassment and guilt. The higher disclosure rates for the non-sexual offenses point to that. Parents are not being informed about a lot of these episodes. They would want to know. And some youth are not even telling their friends. Thus they are not getting a chance to reflect about what happened, process it, and get ideas about how to deal with it and how to put it in perspective. It is somewhat ironic. The Internet is providing places to talk about difficult things, but at the same time, it may be increasing the number of difficult things to talk about.

8. Youth and parents do not report these experiences and do not know where to report them.

Most parents and youth did not know where to report or get help for Internet offenses, and the low rate of reporting for actual offenses confirms this lack of awareness. Even the most serious episodes were rarely reported. The Internet is a new "country" and people do not yet know who the cops or the authorities are. In fact, that seems to be part of the attraction of this territory for many, that there are not obvious cops or authorities. But people need to know how to get help, and people with antisocial tendencies need to know that there are consequences. The choice is not between anarchy and big brother, just as in most societies the choice is not between anarchy and dictatorship.

9. **Internet friendships between teens and adults are not uncommon and seem to be mostly benign.**

It would make prevention easier if Internet friendships between youth and adults were uniformly sinister, and we could simply say, "Don't do it." But one of the positive things about the Internet is that it allows people of diverse social statuses to congregate around common interests. We want young people to develop their skills and talents. We want them to find mentors. The existence of coaches who molest does not deter parents from signing their kids up for Little League. It will be a similarly complicated challenge to protect kids from dangerous Internet relationships without squelching the positive ones. We need to learn more about the signs and symptoms of potentially exploitative adult-youth relationships, not just on the Internet, but in face-to-face relationships too.

10. **We still know little about the incidence of *traveler* cases (where adults or youth travel to physically meet and have sex with someone they first came to know on the Internet), or any completed *Internet seduction* and *Internet sexual exploitation* cases including trafficking in *child pornography*.**

We know these very serious victimizations occur. Law-enforcement officials are tracking down an ever-increasing number. A recent unsystematic survey of the FBI, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, newspapers, and other law-enforcement sources identified almost 800 cases, confirmed or under investigation, involving adults traveling to or luring youth they first "met" on the Internet for criminal sexual activities (Ruben Rodriguez, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, personal communication, April 3, 2000).

We did not find any in this survey of 1,501 youth, but that only means these victimizations probably occur below a certain threshold rate. We were unlikely to discover any types of incidents that occurred to fewer than 14,000 youth a year. That is still a large threshold. But it is fair to speculate that these kinds of events are probably not as common as incidents like date rape, conventional stranger sexual assault, or intrafamily sexual abuse — crimes that do tend to show up in surveys of 1,500 youth. So we will have to study these serious Internet cases in some other way, either through a very large survey, like the National Crime Victimization Survey, or through some survey of reported cases.

In the meantime, the findings of this survey should **not** be interpreted to mean that major law-enforcement initiatives focused on serious Internet crimes against children are misguided. In the last few years, specialized units from the FBI and local law-enforcement agencies have increased their activities on the Internet, often "decoying" themselves as youth to try to catch potential offenders. Given the volume of sexual solicitations and approaches young people are experiencing, the presence and publicity about these decoys is certainly a good thing. It should give potential offenders some pause before they begin their solicitations.

Law-enforcement officials are also active in investigating trafficking in child pornography. Because we judged that our youth interviewees would not be reliable informants about the ages of people appearing in sexual pictures, we have no findings relevant to the problem of child pornography on the Internet. This is nonetheless a problem that has been exacerbated by the Internet, and it is worthy of additional study.

11. Nothing in this survey should dampen enthusiasm about the potential of the Internet.
Youth, families, and educators are currently riding a bandwagon of excitement about the potential of the Internet to bring new kinds of educational, recreational, interpersonal, and even therapeutic possibilities to young people. This survey should not be construed as a signal to slow the wagon down. This survey concerns what is only a small segment of Internet activity and has little to say about its broader potential.

But 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. When the automobile was first introduced, those who said it was going to kill too many people and pollute the air were dismissed as opposed to progress. The solutions that would have allowed us to have all the benefits of safer and less polluting autos might have come more quickly and at a lower social cost if these concerns had been accepted wholeheartedly from the beginning as worthy chaperones to our courtship of the car. In a similar vein, we can unleash the excitement about the Internet and the creativity it will spawn, while still making a concerted effort to monitor and rein in its potential negative effects. The sooner we start that process the better.

Limitations of the Survey

Every scientific survey has limitations and defects. Readers should keep some of these important things in mind when considering the findings and conclusions of this survey.

- We cannot be certain how candid our respondents were. Although we used widely accepted social-science procedures, our interviews involved telephone conversations with young people on a sensitive subject, factors that could contribute to less than complete candor.

- The young people we did not talk to may be different from the youth we talked to. There were parents who refused to participate or refused to allow us to talk to their children, and there were youth who refused to participate and those we could never reach. Our results might have been different if we had been able to talk to all these people.

- Our numbers are only estimates, and samples can be unusual. Population sampling is intended to produce groups representative of the whole population, but sometimes samples can be randomly skewed. For most of our major findings, statistical techniques suggest that estimates are within 2.5% or less of the true population percentage in 95 out of 100 samples like this one, but there is a small chance that our estimates are farther off than 2.5%.

6. Recommendations

1. Those concerned about preventing sexual exploitation on the Internet need to talk specifically in their materials about the diversity of hazards including threats from youthful and female offenders.

A stereotype of the adult Internet "predator" or "pedophile" has come to dominate much of the discussion of Internet victimization. While such figures exist and may be among the most dangerous of Internet threats, this survey has revealed a more diverse array of individuals who are making offensive and potentially exploitative online overtures. We should not ignore them. We have to remember that in a previous generation, campaigns to prevent child molestation characterized the threat as "playground predators" so that for years the problem of youth, acquaintance, and intra-family perpetrators went unrecognized. Today, those doing prevention work concerning the Internet need to be careful not to make, consciously or inadvertently, a characterization of the threat that fails to encompass all its forms. One of the reasons for the mistaken characterization of child molesters in an earlier era was that people extrapolated the problem entirely from what came to the attention of law-enforcement officials. A similar process could be underway in the case of Internet victimization, but it is probably early enough to reverse the trend. Thus we need to publicize the full variety of Internet offensive behavior.

2. Prevention planners and law-enforcement officials need to address the problem of non-sexual, as well as sexual victimization on the Internet.

An additional problem with the "Internet predator" stereotype just mentioned is that it does not give enough focus to non-sexual forms of Internet victimization. The current survey shows that non-sexual threats and harassment constitute another common peril for youth that can be as, or more, distressing than sexual overtures. Experience in crime prevention has shown that concerns about sexual threats often eclipse other equivalently serious crime. Concerted efforts should be made to ensure that non-sexual threats and harassment are included on educational, legislative, and law-enforcement agendas for Internet safety.

3. More of the Internet-using public needs to know about the existence of help sources for Internet offenses, and the reporting of offensive Internet behavior needs to be made even easier, more immediate, and more important to youth Internet users.

Multiple strategies are needed to increase reporting. The Internet-using public needs to be made aware of reporting options in as many ways as possible, through the Internet as well as through other media. The public also needs to be briefed on the reasons why they should make such reports including the importance of keeping the Internet a safe and enjoyable place for everyone to use. The Smokey the Bear and McGruff the Crime Dog campaigns come to mind as approaches to emulate. People often balk at being tattle-tales, but vigilance by individuals and community involvement have been traditional keys to community safety.

In reaching out to the public and Internet users on this issue of reporting, our survey suggests that Internet service providers are in a key position to help. They are the most recognized avenue for reporting. So it may make sense for them to become even more visible and pro-active on this front. What else can be done? Can chat rooms be urged to consider how to make the monitoring and reporting of offensive behavior easier and more acceptable? The Internet needs its own neighborhood crime-watch posters and more.

4. Different prevention and intervention strategies need to be developed for youth of different ages.

Most of the encounters reported to our survey occurred to teenagers, specifically older teens. The messages that will make sense and be taken seriously by this group and their parents are quite different from those that make sense for younger youth. This is a different problem from conventional child molestation, where we were trying to target and protect 7 to 13 year olds. Older teens have more independence, more experience, and a different relationship with adults and their families. For example, telling parents to regularly check the Internet and E-mail activity of older teens may be tantamount to saying parents should read their mail, and such privacy invasions will seem unrealistic in many families.

Too much of the discussion about Internet safety to date has been between policy makers and parents, without consultation from young people themselves. Policies crafted from such an adults-only discussion may be rejected, especially by older youth, because the policies may be seen as an effort to control rather than protect. Good protection strategies, especially for the teen group, cannot be heavy on the control dimension and need to be tied to youth aspirations, values, and culture. That requires the input of youth. If young people are becoming millionaires with their Internet ingenuity, it is likely that some of that creativity could hit the jackpot in the field of Internet safety as well. It is time to involve a cadre of young people in the development of Internet victimization prevention and intervention in order to craft messages to which youth will be receptive.

5. Youth need to be mobilized in a campaign to help "clean up" the standards of Internet behavior and take responsibility for youth-oriented parts of the Internet.

Like face-to-face sexual offenses, which run the gamut from harassment to rape, Internet sexual offenses cover a spectrum of behaviors. The less serious end of the spectrum should not be ignored, since it can be the fertile soil in which more serious offenses grow. The experience of those trying to prevent real-world sexual harassment has been that campaigns, particularly campaigns involving whole schools, can be successful, if they raise awareness about the problem and its effects, and help youth themselves enforce proper conduct among their peers. Such youth-oriented campaigns might have some success with at least some forms of Internet victimization as well, and they may be worth a try.

6. We need to train mental health, school, and family counselors about these new Internet hazards and how these hazards contribute to personal distress and other psychological and interpersonal problems.

This survey reveals that substantial numbers of young people do experience distress because of Internet encounters. And they are not getting help. Mental health and other counselors need to learn to be alert and ask questions to get young people to talk about such encounters. They need to know how young people use the Internet, so they can understand their problems. They need to be trained to treat the kinds of distress and conflicts that are connected with negative Internet experiences. We need educational packages for schools and all kinds of youth workers for their own professional development and to use with youth. Unfortunately, at the training conferences being offered today, most of the Internet education seems directed at law-enforcement officials. We need to develop workshops for educators, psychologists, and social workers as well.

7. Social scientists should cooperate with Internet technologists to explore various social and technological strategies for reducing offensive and illegal behavior on the Internet.

The offensive behavior on the Internet is so extensive that it should be a more central problem for social planning and policy. The country got a wake-up call about hackers recently, but we need a wake-up call about youth victimization too. Much has been learned over the years about reducing crime, social deviance, and public disorder in communities. Many of those lessons are adaptable to the Internet, which after all is a community, albeit one with special properties. In the crime field, for example, success in reducing crime has been achieved through more community policing and cleaning up minor kinds of neighborhood disorder and decay. Crime-watch campaigns that deputize and empower community members to look out for crime have worked to reduce theft. In the education field, school revitalization campaigns have successfully improved decorum and reduced antisocial behavior in schools. Thought should be given to applying such lessons to the Internet community.

8. Much more research is needed on the developmental impact of unwanted exposure to sexual material among youth of different ages.

The Internet is almost certainly increasing the frequency and explicitness of such exposures, but even more importantly, it is certainly increasing the number of youth exposed involuntarily and suddenly. Although this topic has commanded some public attention, to date there has been little research on it. But even if the vast majority of such encounters are trivial or benign, it would be important to know under what conditions such encounters can be influential or stressful and what kinds of interventions are useful for preventing negative influence. The domain of influences could be broad. They could include attitudes about sex, attitudes about the Internet, and matters of family dynamics. These are not easy matters to study in an ethical and dispassionate way, but it can be done. We should make it a priority to do so.

9. More understanding is needed about families' knowledge of, attitudes about, and experience with filtering and blocking software.

This survey found that a minority of families with youth were using blocking or filtering software, even though most families said adults should be very or extremely concerned about the problem of youth exposure to sexual material. Blocking and filtering software is one main line of defense available to families concerned about the problem. It is the response strongly advocated by people opposed to legislative solutions. Why isn't it being used more?

Its nonuse may reflect a lack of knowledge about its availability, suspicions about its utility, or a lack of suitability of such software in the context of real-family dynamics and Internet use practices. For example, the introduction of such software may provoke conflicts between adults and youth or at least create fears about such conflicts. It is interesting that 5% of the families we interviewed had used filtering or blocking software in the past year and then discontinued its use.

Before recommending that more families use such software, it is important to know more about its operation. If lack of knowledge is the problem, then education and awareness can be the answer. If the software does not suit the concerns of families or is difficult to use in real family contexts, then new designs or approaches may be needed. We need detailed, real-life evaluation research about available Internet blocking and filtering technologies.

10. Laws are needed to help ensure offensive acts that are illegal in other contexts will also be illegal on the Internet.

Some of the offensive behaviors revealed in this survey — especially sexual solicitations by adults of minors and some of the threatening harassment — are probably illegal under current law. But questions have been raised about whether and how various criminal statutes apply to Internet behavior, because most law was written prior to the development of the Internet. Although it is a daunting task, criminal statutes need to be systematically reviewed with the Internet in mind to make sure that relevant statutes cover Internet behaviors.

11. Concern about Internet victimization should not eclipse prevention and intervention efforts to combat other conventional forms of youth victimization.

This survey has revealed that youth report many offensive and distressing experiences on the Internet. But Internet victimization has not become, nor is it threatening to become, the most serious crime peril in children's lives, just the newest. Among the regular Internet users in our survey, 30% had been physically attacked in real life by other youth in the last year, 1% had been physically abused by an adult, and 1% had been sexually assaulted. None of these serious offenses had any connection, as far as we can tell, to the Internet. None of the Internet threats we documented actually materialized into a face-to-face violent offense. We need to mobilize about Internet victimization because it is new, causes distress, could mushroom, and could otherwise escape attention. But the conventional crime perils in the lives of children and youth are all too real and continuing. Youth the age of the respondents in this survey have conventional violent crime victimization rates — rape, robbery, and aggravated assault — that are twice that of the adult population (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). Children and adolescents are the most criminally victimized segment in our society. So, as much as possible, efforts to address Internet victimization should try to combine with, and not displace, efforts to prevent youth crime victimization in general.

12. More research is needed.

Even more so than other kinds of social activity, Internet interactions occur in private. It is hard to see how other people are behaving. It is hard to know what the norms are. And it is hard to know where the help sources are. There are large numbers of people who need to know more about what is going on in this arena, because they have never used the Internet. So the role of research is important. We hope that this survey is one of the first in a long series of studies and findings that will help shed light on this serious topic.

7. Methodological Details

The *Youth Internet Safety Survey* used telephone interviews to gather information from a national sample of 1,501 young people, ages 10 through 17, who were regular Internet users. "Regular Internet use" was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past six months on a computer at home, a school, a library, someone else's home, or some other place. This definition was chosen to exclude occasional Internet users, while including a range of both "heavy" and "light" users. Prior to the youth interview, a short interview was conducted with a parent or guardian in the household. Regular Internet use by a youth was determined initially by questions to the parent or guardian, and confirmed during the youth interview.

Households with youth in the target age group were identified through another large household survey, the *Second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART 2)*, which was conducted by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University between February and December 1999. *NISMART 2* interviewers screened more than 180,000 telephone numbers to identify more than 16,000 households with children aged 18 and younger. Telephone numbers for households including young people aged 9 through 17 were forwarded to and dialed by interviewers for the *Youth Internet Safety Survey*.

The interviews for the *Youth Internet Safety Survey* were conducted by the staff of an experienced national survey research firm, Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI). Upon reaching a household, interviewers screened for regular Internet use by a child in the household age 10 through 17. Internet use was defined as "connecting a computer or a TV to a phone or cable line to use things like the world wide web and E-mail." Interviewers, speaking with an adult, identified the child in the household who used the Internet most often. They then conducted a short interview with the parent who knew the most about the child's Internet use. The interview included questions about household rules and parental concerns about Internet use, as well as demographic characteristics. At the close of the parent interview, the interviewer requested permission to speak with the previously identified youth. Parents were assured of the confidentiality of the interview, told that young participants would receive checks for $10, and informed the interview would include questions about "sexual material your child may have seen."

With parental consent, interviewers described the survey to the youth and obtained his or her oral consent. Youth interviews lasted from about 15 to 30 minutes. They were scheduled at the convenience of youth participants and arranged for times when they could talk freely and confidentially. Questions were constructed so youth responses were mostly short, one-word answers that would not reveal anything meaningful to persons overhearing any portion of the conversation. Where longer answers were requested, questions were phrased, "This may be something private. If you feel you can talk freely, or move to a place where you can talk freely, please tell me what happened." Youth were not pressed for answers. They were promised complete confidentiality and told they could skip any questions they did not want to answer and stop the interview at any time. The survey was conducted under the supervision of the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board, and conformed to the rules mandated by research projects funded by the U.S. Department of Justice. Youth respondents received brochures about Internet safety as well as checks for $10.

Participation Rate

Based on standard calculations of participation rate, 75% of the households approached completed the screening necessary to determine their eligibility for participation in the survey. The completion rate among households with eligible respondents was 82%. Five percent of parents in eligible households refused the adult interview. Another 11% of parents completed the adult interview but refused permission for their child to participate in the youth interview. In 2% of eligible households, parents consented to the youth interview, but youth refused to participate. An additional 1% of eligible households were in "call-back" status when 1,501 interviews were completed. (Because of rounding, the completion-rate numbers add up to more than 100%.)

Sample

The final sample consisted of 796 boys and 705 girls. (*See* Table Intro-1 for a description of the demographic characteristics of the sample.) This is not a representative sample of all youth within the United States because Internet use is not evenly distributed among the population. Internet users tend to have higher incomes and more education than non-Internet users, and, among lower income groups, Internet users are more likely to be white — although this racial difference disappears at higher income levels (NPR Report, 2000). While boys are somewhat more likely than girls to use the Internet, the difference is small and attributable to boys' propensity to play computer games (Roberts, 1999). The sample for the *Youth Internet Safety Survey* generally matches other representative samples of youth Internet users.

Instrumentation

The incidence rates for sexual solicitation, unwanted exposure to sexual material, and harassment were estimated based on a series of screener questions about unwanted experiences while using the Internet. Two of the screeners concerned harassment, four involved unwanted exposure to sexual material, three focused on sexual solicitation, and one question asked if anyone online had encouraged the youth to run away from home. (Episodes reported in response to the screeners were not counted as "incidents" unless they met additional definitional criteria.) More extensive follow-up questions were asked about the unwanted incidents and used to further classify the reported episodes into the categories reported on in this paper.

Follow-up questions were limited to only two reported incidents because of time constraints. Consequently, some incidents reported by young people were not the subject of follow-up questions, and these incidents were omitted from incidence rates. If a youth reported incidents in more than two categories, run-away incidents were given first priority for follow-up questions, harassment incidents second priority, sexual solicitation incidents third priority, and unwanted exposure incidents fourth priority. If a youth reported more than one incident in a particular category, the follow-up questions referred to the "most bothersome" incident or, if none was "most bothersome," the most recent incident. The limits on follow-up questions probably led to some undercounting of incidents, particularly episodes of unwanted exposure to sexual material.

Screener Questions

1. In the past year, did you ever feel worried or threatened because someone was bothering or harassing you online?

2. In the past year, did anyone ever use the Internet to threaten or embarrass you by posting or sending messages about you for other people to see?

3. In the past year when you were doing an online search or surfing the web, did you ever find yourself in a web site that showed pictures of naked people or of people having sex when **you did not want to be in that kind of site**?

4. In the past year, did you ever receive E-mail or Instant Messages **that you did not want** with advertisements for or links to X-rated web sites?

   4a. Did you ever **open** a message or a link in a message that showed you actual pictures of naked people or people having sex **that you did not want**?

5. In the past year, when you were online, did you ever find people talking about sex in a place or time when **you did not want this kind of talk**?

6. In the past year, did anyone on the Internet ever try to get you to talk online about sex when you **did not want to**?

7. In the past year, did anyone on the Internet ask you for sexual information about yourself when you did not want to answer such questions? I mean very personal questions, like what your body looks like or sexual things you have done.

8. In the past year, did anyone on the Internet ever ask you to **do** something sexual that you did not want to do?

9. In the past year, did anyone on the Internet ever ask you or encourage you to runaway from home?

Note: Episodes reported in response to the screeners were not counted as "incidents" unless they met additional definitional criteria.

Prevalence of Internet Use

Estimates of the prevalence of regular Internet use for youth ages 10 through 17 were created from data gathered during eligibility screening for the survey. This data allowed for the calculation of numbers and ages of children in households that screened out of the survey as having no Internet use, as well as numbers and ages of children in households that screened into the survey. National estimates of regular Internet use by age are presented in Table 7-1. The middle column in the table represents the percentage of youth in the U.S. in each age group who used the Internet regularly in 1999, based on the screening for this survey. The estimated number of Internet users in column three was derived by multiplying the percentage of Internet users in each age group by the 1999 census figures for the population for that age group (not shown). See the next section titled "How Many Youth Had Online Episodes" for information about the limitations of these estimates.

Table 7-1. National Estimates of Regular Internet Use by Age[1]

Age	% Internet Users	Estimated # Internet Users[2]
10 Years Old	52%	2,100,000
11 Years Old	64%	2,490,000
12 Years Old	77%	2,970,000
13 Years Old	81%	3,150,000
14 Years Old	79%	3,080,000
15 Years Old	86%	3,270,000
16 Years Old	83%	3,260,000
17 Years Old	87%	3,490,000
Total		23,810,000

[1]Confidence intervals were not calculated for these figures.
[2] Estimates are rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

How Many Youth Had Online Episodes?

Because this sample of youth was designed to be representative of all regular Internet users ages 10 through 17 in the U.S., it is tempting to try to translate percentages from this survey into actual numbers or population estimates. For example, the 19% of the sample who experienced a sexual solicitation or approach in the last year can be multiplied against our estimate that 23.81 million youth between 10 and 17 are regular Internet users to yield a population number of 4.52 million youth who might have had such an episode.

This precision, however, can be somewhat misleading. Sample surveys have margins of error, which are described in scientific terms as "95% confidence intervals." These confidence intervals express the range of numbers within which the "true" number is likely to fall in 95 out of 100 attempts to estimate it with a sample of this size. So in this sample of 1,501, it is 95% likely that the true number of youth experiencing a sexual solicitation or approach in the previous year falls in a range that could be almost half a million youth more or less than our estimate of 4.52 million. These ranges are provided for seven of the major episode types in Table 7-2. Unfortunately, in this case the imprecision for such estimates is compounded by the fact that the figure for regular Internet users is **also** an estimate with its own margin of error (not calculated for this report) and not a number obtained from an actual census count.

Thus because both the parameters needed to make a population estimate have large elements of imprecision and because population estimates can take on an aura of exactitude that is sometimes misleading, we have, in this report, followed the convention with most social-scientific surveys of this size and reported the results primarily in terms of percentages (in this case of regular Internet users). We recommend this approach to other interpreters of this survey.

Table 7-2. Population Estimates and Confidence Intervals for Online Victimization of Youth[1]

Online Victimization	% Regular Internet Users	95% Confidence Interval	Estimated Number of Youth[2]	95% Confidence Interval[2]
Sexual Solicitations and Approaches				
• Any	19%	17%-21%	4,520,000	4,050,000–4,990,000
• Distressing	5%	4%-6%	1,190,000	930,000–1,450,000
• Aggressive	3%	2%-4%	710,000	510,000–910,000
Unwanted Exposure to Sexual Material				
• Any	25%	23%-27%	5,950,000	5,430,000–6,470,000
• Distressing	6%	5%-7%	1,430,000	1,140,000–1,720,000
Harassment				
• Any	6%	5%-7%	1,430,000	1,140,000–1,720,000
• Distressing	2%	1%-3%	480,000	310,000–650,000

[1] Estimates and confidence intervals are based on an estimated number of 23,810,000 regular Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17.
[2] Estimates and confidence intervals are all rounded to the nearest ten thousand.

8. References

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National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization, serves as a clearinghouse of information on missing and exploited children; provides technical assistance to individuals and law-enforcement agencies; offers training programs to law-enforcement and social-service professionals; distributes photographs and descriptions of missing children worldwide; coordinates child-protection efforts with the private sector; networks with nonprofit service providers and state clearinghouses on missing-person cases; and provides information on effective legislation to help ensure the protection of children per 42 USC § 5771 and 42 USC § 5780.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line is available for those who have information on missing and exploited children at **1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)**. This number is available throughout the United States and Canada. The toll-free number when dialing from Mexico is 001-800-843-5678. The "phone free" number when dialing from Europe is 00-800-0843-5678. Online reporting is available worldwide at **www.cybertipline.com.** The number when dialing from any other country is 001-703-522-9320. The TDD line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-274-3900, and the NCMEC facsimile number is 703-274-2222. The web-site address is www.missingkids.com.

For information on the services offered by our NCMEC branches, please call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, Kansas City at 816-361-4554, New York at 716-242-0900, and South Carolina at 803-254-2326.

A number of publications addressing various aspects of the missing- and exploited-child issue are available free of charge in single copies by contacting the

Charles B. Wang International Children's Building
699 Prince Street
Alexandria Virginia 22314-3175
1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST)
www.missingkids.com

Crimes Against Children Research Center

The Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) seeks to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research, statistics, and program evaluation to the public, policy makers, law-enforcement personnel, and other child-welfare practitioners. CCRC maintains a publication list of articles concerning the nature and impact of crimes such as child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, property crimes, and physical and sexual abuse of children written by researchers associated with the CCRC. Current activities funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice include developing questionnaires to assess juvenile crime victimization, evaluating children's advocacy centers, assessing barriers to greater reporting of crimes against children, and studying the incidence of and factors related to child abduction. The CCRC also draws on funding from grants, individual gifts, revenues from publications and programs, and state and federal sources.

The Crimes Against Children Research Center was created in 1998 at the University of New Hampshire. It grew out of and expands upon the work of the Family Research Laboratory, which has been devoted to the study of family violence, child victimization, and related topics since 1975. Associated with the CCRC is an internationally recognized group of experts who have published numerous books and articles concerning the incidence and impact of violence against children.

More information about CCRC publications and activities is available from the Program Administrator

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Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth