QUALITATIVE METHODS

Predatory Online Behavior: Modus Operandi of Convicted Sex Offenders in Identifying Potential Victims and Contacting Minors Over the Internet

L. Alvin Malesky, Jr.

ABSTRACT. Sex offenders have used the Internet to identify and contact minors for sexual exploitation (Armagh, 1998; Hernandez, 2000; Lamb, 1998; Lanning, 1998). Yet little is known about how these individuals select their online victims. In order to gain a better understanding of this behavior, the online activity of 31 men who perpetrated or attempted to perpetrate contact sex offenses against minors they communicated with via the Internet, was examined. Three-fourths of the participants monitored chat room dialogue and almost one-half reviewed online profiles of minors in an attempt to identify potential victims. Recommendations
The Internet has expanded educational programs, assisted in the development of commerce and business, and has facilitated communication around the world. However, the Internet and its related technology have also been used in reprehensible conduct, including the advancement of extremist (i.e., anti-black or anti-white) ideologies (Schafer, 2002), the growth of organized crime (Conly, 1989), and the victimization of minors (Armagh, 1998; Department of Justice, Equality, and Law Reform, 1998; Lanning, 1998). This study focuses on the online sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

Most sex offenders know their victims prior to committing a sexual assault (U.S. Department of Justice [USDOJ], 2000). One way sex offenders have become acquainted with their victims is by communicating with them over the Internet (Booth, 1999; Durkin & Bryant, 1995; Jackson, 1989; Kopelev, 1999; Lamb, 1998; Levy et al., 1995; McLaughlin, 2000). Specifically, offenders have used chat rooms that cater to children as a venue to contact and converse with potential victims (Armagh, 1998; Kantrowitz, King, & Rosenberg, 1994; Kopelev, 1999; Lamb, 1998; McLaughlin, 2000; Thomas, 1997). Internet chat rooms are sites on the Internet where individuals communicate in real time via typing text on their computer. Because the Internet can provide anonymity for its users (Cooper, 1998), adults can misrepresent their age and even present themselves as adolescents while interacting with actual minors online. The anonymity of cyberspace makes it difficult to discern if an individual is a minor communicating with other children for benign reasons or an adult masquerading as a child for nefarious purposes. Thus, the Internet provides ideal cover for online predators searching for potential victims.

It should also be noted that an increasing number of adolescents are accessing the Internet. It has been estimated that approximately 77 million minors were online in 2005 (USDJ, 2001). Given that child sex offenders often visit sites frequented by children, it makes sense that at
least some sex offenders will utilize the Internet as a means of contact-
ing and interacting with minors. Unfortunately, little is known about how
child sex offenders identify potential victims or contact minors online.
The goal of this study is to expand the knowledge base regarding sex of-
fenders’ predatory online behaviors, thereby providing information that
parents and guardians can use to keep their children safer while online.

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study were 31 male inmates in the Federal Bureau
of Prisons’ Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP). All participants
attempted to, or did perpetrate contact sex offenses against minors they
met and communicated with over the Internet. Demographically, 29 in-
dividuals (94%) self-identified as Caucasian, one (3%) as Asian/Pacific
Islander, and one (3%) as African American/Black. Seventeen partici-
pants (56%) completed at least junior college, including two (7%) that
held graduate degrees. Eleven individuals (36%) reported completion
of high school as their highest level of education and two (7%) reported
completing trade school. One individual (3%) did not provide infor-
mation regarding his educational background. Participants ranged from
23 to 52 years of age ($M = 36.62, SD = 8.29$).

Twenty-two individuals (71%) reported having at least one child sex-
ual contact victim. The mean and median regarding contact victims per
offender were 2.35 and 1, respectively ($SD = 3.08$). It should be noted
that some participants indicated that the “minor” they were communi-
cating with via the Internet was actually a law enforcement agent pre-
tending to be a child. Consequently, they were apprehended before they
had the opportunity to offend against an actual child.

Materials

A questionnaire developed by the author was used to collect demo-
graphic information as well as information about participants’ Internet
usage.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from the SOTP. Announcements were made
requesting participants for this study at the beginning of discussion (treat-
ment) groups. Interested individuals were given research packets and
asked to complete the questionnaires and return them in envelopes provided with each packet. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that the data would be kept confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. No compensation or inducements were provided to individuals for participating in the research project. Given the descriptive nature of this study, data were reported by means, medians, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages.

Participants were given the opportunity to comment on what initially “attracted” them to a particular child/adolescent online. Qualitative analysis was used to examine these comments. Patton (1990) recommended a procedure of qualitative analysis where a reviewer places research participants’ comments in categories that reflect similar themes. Upon completion of this step, a second reviewer evaluates the initial categories to insure that they are appropriate and that the data “fit” the categories (Patton, 1990). This type of procedure is an accepted form of qualitative analysis (Colaizzi, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1989). The following method was then used to examine respondents’ statements. Participants’ comments were individually copied on index cards. Two graduate students in clinical psychology independently reviewed the comments and then organized the cards according to themes. These themes were then compared in a discussion facilitated by a third rater.

RESULTS

Chat rooms were the most frequently used component of the Internet to identify and contact potential victims. Twenty-five individuals (81%) reported visiting chat rooms geared toward minors for the purpose of meeting children/adolescents. Of these 25 individuals, 14 attempted to set up an in-person meeting for sex with the minors they met in these chat rooms. In addition to chat rooms, online profiles of Internet users and postings to bulletin boards were used to identify potential victims. Fifteen participants (48.4%) reported reviewing online profiles of minors and three individuals (9.7%) stated that bulletin board postings were used to screen for possible victims.

Qualitative analyses were conducted on participants’ responses to the question “What initially attracted you to a particular child/adolescent online that you wanted to establish a relationship with for sexual purposes?” (see Table 1). Although comments were limited in scope and detail, consensus was reached among two reviewers as to three central
themes. First, a minor mentioning sex in any fashion online (e.g., in a child’s online profile, screen name, posting, e-mail) appeared to serve as an impetus for the participant to contact the minor. Second, participants indicated that when they met a child online who appeared “needy” or “submissive” they would try to initiate an online relationship with the child. For example, one participant stated “Neediness is very apparent when a child will do anything to keep talking to you. Also, that they are always online shows low sense of parental contact or interest in the child.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>Verbatim Response to: “What initially attracted you to a particular child/adolescent online that you wanted to establish a relationship with for sexual purposes?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>157</td>
<td>When they stated that they were interested in having sex with an older man on their profile, or when they were in a chat room for younger women for older men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155</td>
<td>I said “Hi” to many girls. I would chat with those that responded. Those stating they were 10-yr-olds or so were attractive to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>Discussion about homosexual relationships and sex acts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>Young-appearing nickname, sexually suggestive nicknames, my initial reactions to chatting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>I’m attracted to girls 11-17 who identify themselves as submissive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>Reminded me of myself and wanted to help stop the suicidal thoughts but became attached in my mind and thought I deserved it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>I was talking to two female girls who were 13 and 14. They were in a bulletin board where sexual matter was being discussed. I was interested in them being sexual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>A knowledge and interest in sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>“Neediness” is very apparent when a child will do anything to keep talking to you. Also, that they are always online shows low sense of parental contact or interest in the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>The fictitious 14-yr-old was confused about adult homosexuality. My arranged meeting was going to be to discuss these issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Willingness to chat openly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Need for friendship, appearing interested in sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Their interest in me or a particular subject that we shared a common interest in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Internet handle, specifically saying something about sex in messages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>They usually had their age as part of their id, for example, LINDA 14.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>They would post sexually suggestive personal information on their profile page. That is, “I’m into sex with older men, enjoy bondage, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Generally the name or what was said.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
always online shows a low sense of parental contact or interest in the child.” Third, the minor’s screen name, especially if it was “young sounding” appeared to motivate some participants to contact these children. One participant wrote, “They usually had their age as pat [sic] of their id., e.g., LINDA14.” Thus, mentioning sex in any fashion, “neediness,” and readily apparent age were identified as information or characteristics that “attracted” participants to particular children or adolescents.

Once online contact was established with a minor, participants engaged in a variety of illegal or inappropriate behaviors. Over half of the participants (52%) reported sending child pornography to minors via the Internet. This behavior is salient given that some offenders use pornography to “groom” and seduce potential victims (Feather, 1999; Lanning, 1992). In addition, almost all (97%) the participants engaged in sexually explicit online conversations with minors. It is important to note that nine participants (29%) reported representing themselves as children while having online conversations with actual children/adolescents.

**DISCUSSION**

It has been suggested that some child sex offenders troll cyberspace searching for victims (Armagh, 1998; Lanning, 1998). The results of this study support this assertion. Over 80% of participants frequented chat rooms geared toward minors for the purpose of meeting children/adolescents. Many of these individuals attempted to set up meetings to have sex with the minors that they corresponded with in these chat rooms. Results also indicated that the most common characteristic of potential online victims (as reported by the offenders) was their willingness to make sexual comments or discuss sexually related issues or topics. In addition to chat room dialogue, almost half of the participants reported reading online profiles of children in an attempt to identify potential victims. These highly predatory behaviors are disconcerting but not altogether surprising when one considers that some child sex offenders are willing to spend exorbitant amounts of time and energy pursuing potential victims.

Participants in this study provided valuable information that can be used to protect children from online predators. Based on the comments of the participants, minors should avoid topics of a sexual nature and not be drawn into sexual conversations over the Internet. This is especially true in chat rooms. Even if a minor is confident that he/she knows the person with whom he/she is communicating, there is no way to verify
the identity of other individuals in the chat room. In addition, children should not mention or provide personal information (e.g., age) or make sexual remarks in their online profile or as part of their screen names.

Finally, parents and/or guardians should be involved with their children’s online activity. They should know who their children communicate with via the Internet as well as not allow them to spend inordinate amounts of time online. Parents should also convey to their children the importance of informing the parents if they receive online pornography, especially child pornography. In addition, children should inform their parent(s) if someone attempts to engage them in online sexual conversations. For adolescents, it is possible that these conversations are simply harmless high jinks or even a form of flirting among peers; however, given the anonymity of the Internet it is not always possible to discern the true identity of the sender or poster of an online message. It should be further noted that individuals may “eavesdrop” on minors’ online conversations in chat rooms. Therefore, even if the conversation is a harmless exchange among peers, online predators may still exploit these discussions by using the information to target potential victims at a later date. Although these suggestions appear to be common sense, the fact remains that child sex offenders have exploited children in situations where these suggestions have not been followed.

Limitations

The results of this study should be viewed in conjunction with several limitations. First, given that self-report was utilized to collect data, participants had the opportunity to minimize their sexually deviant Internet usage and number of contact victims. Due to the confidential nature of this research, no attempts were made to verify the veracity of the respondents’ report. It should be noted that it is relatively common for this participant population (sex offenders) to engage in minimization and denial concerning their sexual offenses and illegal sexual histories (Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999). Therefore, it is possible that the results of this study may in fact under-represent illegal Internet usage and sexual behavior.

Second, all participants in this study were voluntarily involved in the SOTP at FCC-Butner, a highly intensive and very demanding program. Individuals who enter this program often are very motivated to stop their sexually abusive behaviors. In addition, the FCC-Butner program has selective screening criteria that exclude highly anti-social and psychopathic
individuals. Therefore, caution must be exercised when generalizing the results of this study to sex offenders who chose not to engage in treatment or who are highly psychopathic.

A third limitation deals with the generalizability of the findings to all Internet sex offenders. Since the sample of offenders in this study consisted almost exclusively of Caucasians, these findings may not be generalizable to Internet sex offenders of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, given that over half of the participants in this sample had completed at least junior college, the results of this study may not be generalizable to individuals with less formal education.

Future Research

There are over 7,000 convicted sex offenders in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (B. Pelisseir, personal communication, December 14, 2001), yet only about 100 of these individuals participate at any time in the SOTP. Although there is a waiting list to enroll in the SOTP at Butner, the majority of the 7,000 incarcerated sex offenders have chosen not to participate in sex offender treatment. Therefore, it is possible that participants in this study are qualitatively different from sex offenders who do not seek treatment for their sexual deviancy. It would be beneficial if future researchers solicit information regarding sexually deviant Internet usage from individuals who choose not to engage in the treatment process. This would provide a more complete picture of Internet usage by all sex offenders.

CONCLUSION

The Internet can be an incredible learning and communication tool for children and adolescents. However, Internet usage can also place minors in contact with individuals who wish to do them harm. In order to minimize the possibility of being victimized when using the Internet, children should not engage in sexual conversations or make sexual statements while online, especially in chat rooms when they do not know who might be “eavesdropping” on their conversations. In addition, minors should not include readily identifiable personal information in online profiles or screen names. Hopefully, these suggestions coupled with parental supervision will help to reduce the number of children who are victimized by online predators.
AUTHOR NOTE

L. Alvin Malesky, Jr., PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Western Carolina University. He earned his PhD in Counseling Psychology from the University of Memphis. He completed an APA-approved internship at the Federal Correctional Complex in Butner, North Carolina and a postdoctoral fellowship in Forensic Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He currently teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in forensic psychology and sexual victimization.

REFERENCES


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