ATSA Statement on Internet-Facilitated Sexual Offending

Adopted by the ATSA Executive Board of Directors on September 7, 2010

There has been increasing public and professional attention paid to Internet-facilitated sexual offending in recent years. Internet-related sexual offending includes different crimes: the largest number involve viewing, trading, or producing child pornography to be traded or posted on-line. Other offenders use the Internet to make contact with a child, adolescent or other vulnerable persons for sexual chat (electronic correspondence), exploitation such as convincing a child to view or produce pornographic images (e.g., having the child take and email a nude picture of him/herself), or to arrange face-to-face meetings to commit sexual offenses (sometimes referred to as "luring" or "traveler" offending). Both criminal justice and clinical data suggest there have been steady increases in the number of cases prosecuted and, subsequently, the number of clinical referrals for these behaviors.[i]

A primary concern for professionals who evaluate and treat Internet-facilitated sexual offenders is the risk these individuals may pose for direct contact offenses with victim(s) or future Internet-facilitated sexual offenses such as accessing and/or distributing child pornography. Accurate risk assessment is critical to decisions involving prioritizing cases by law enforcement and making appropriate recommendations for sentencing, treatment, and level of supervision. Across studies of Internet-facilitated child pornography offenders, approximately one in ten has an officially known history of contact sexual offending and; therefore, can be assessed using one of the established actuarial risk scales.[ii] However, the majority of Internet-facilitated sexual offenders have no known history of contact sexual offenses, although self-report evidence suggests a significant proportion of offenders have committed undetected contact offenses. There is currently no risk measure specifically developed for use with Internet-facilitated offenders who have no official history of contact sexual offenses.

Several overlapping, follow-up studies of child pornography offenders suggest these individuals present less risk for future hands-on offenses, on average, than undifferentiated samples of contact sex offenders.[iii] The study with the longer follow-up period revealed that 8.5% of the sample committed a contact sexual offense after an average "at risk" period of almost six years. Child pornography offenders also presented a relatively low risk to commit another child pornography offense. The preliminary results of follow-up research suggest criminal history, self-reported sexual interest in children, and unstable lifestyle (e.g., substance use problems) factors identify which child pornography offenders are more likely commit a contact sexual offense in the future.[iv] It is very likely that these same factors would also predict recidivism among so-called "luring" offenders or "travelers." With regard to risk management, approximately a quarter of child pornography offenders breached a condition of bail, probation, or parole; a majority of these failures were for prohibited proximity or contact with a child or for using computers, usually to contact children or download more child pornography.[v]

A nationwide American study of "luring" offenders revealed that, contrary to the belief that young children are tricked by "sexual predators" into revealing personal information or meeting in person, all cases reported to police involved teenagers, approximately half of whom were ages 13 and 14, and the majority being female.[vi] In most cases, the teenagers were aware the perpetrator was an adult and was interested in a sexual relationship. Also, in most cases, the teenagers willingly met with the adult perpetrators (sometimes on more than one occasion) and described the interactions in romantic terms. This research suggests Internet "luring" is more similar to statutory rape type offenses than contact offenses involving physical coercion and/or young children.

Studies that have compared Internet-facilitated sex offenders to contact sex offenders have found consistent differences.[vii] These studies suggest Internet-facilitated sex offenders are less antisocial and are; therefore, less of a risk to commit a new offense or a probation violation than contact sex offenders. These studies also suggest Internet-facilitated sex offenders are similar to or score lower than contact sex offenders on measures of clinical needs including offense-supportive attitudes and beliefs, intimacy deficits, and emotional problems. At the same time, child pornography offenders are more likely to show pedophilic sexual arousal on penile plethysmograph assessment than are contact sex offenders.[viii]

Although researchers have suggested several typologies of Internet-facilitated offenders, we currently know very little about the treatment and supervision needs of Internet-related sex offenders. These typologies include individuals who are sexually interested in children, those who are more sexually indiscriminate, those who are curious, and those who opportunistically engage in Internet-facilitated offending (e.g., an adult male who uses the Internet to gain sexual access to adolescents). Effective intervention will need to be tailored to the type of offender and the risk they present. For example, an individual who viewed child pornography out of curiosity and is a low risk to offend in the future might require little (or no) treatment and minimal supervision while a pedophilic individual who opportunistically used the Internet to gain access to victims and who is a higher risk to offend in the future would require more intensive treatment and supervision. Regulation of access to the Internet would be expected to be a central consideration in treatment or supervision. Methodologically sound evaluation research is needed to develop effective treatment programs for Internet-facilitated sex offenders.

[i] e.g., Motivans & Kyckelhahn, 2007
[ii] Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, in press
[iii] Seto & Eke, 2005; Seto, 2009; and Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, in press
[iv] Seto, 2009
[v] Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2010
[vi] Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008
[vii] e.g., Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2010; Webb, Crassaiti, & Keen, 2007; and Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann, in press
[viii] Seto, Cantor & Blanchard, 2006; and Babchishin, Hanson, and Hermann, in press

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