

Common Myths Regarding Online Solicitation

The ATSA *Policy Statement on Internet-Facilitated Sex Offending* reads, in part:

“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. 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.”

Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Ybarra (2008) summarized research regarding online solicitation. Their program - *Crimes Against Children's Research Center* has the most comprehensive American data on solicitation offending. Their research is distinguished because they focus on cases where real-life meetings with real minors take place, as opposed to cases where adults in discussions with undercover police officers pursued online only interactions. Some of their findings:

Stranger danger

Approximately 1-in-7 youth have been sexually solicited online. Most solicitations were from peers and likely involved someone the youth already knew. A small portion of youth had been sexually solicited by an adult, with a 5% figure of total youth solicited by an adult. In another study, 30% of the solicitations come from adults (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007). Most of the adult situations involved strangers met online (Grosskopf, 2009; Lamb, 1998; Martellozzo, 2010).

Ten percent of middle school students report they communicated with a stranger whom they had initially met online. (Remember that a majority of these strangers are same-aged-peers). Of these middle schoolers, 54% went on to meet with the stranger. In the same study, 65% of high school girls and 53% of high school boys have been asked to meet a stranger in person. Of these students, approximately 1/3 went on to meet with the stranger (Dowdell, Burgess, and Flores, 2011).

Lying about age

Of cases involving adult offenders, only 5% of those charged with solicitation offenses pretended to be a teenager themselves. A minority did pretend to be younger than they actually were, but they still admitted to being an adult. (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008).

Grooming

In general, online solicitors did not lie about their sexual intentions. Youth who agreed to real-life meetings knew they were meeting to engage in sexual activity and the majority of youths who met adults had repeat encounters (73%).

Risk of assault or abduction

Solicitation cases rarely involve violence. Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Ybarra (2008) found that 5% of solicitation cases involve use of threats or force. Abduction was rare, though one quarter of the solicitation cases started as a missing person reports because the youth ran away with the offender or lied to parents about his or her whereabouts.

Young or naïve children

In the solicitation cases involving real minors, no minor was younger than 12, half were 13 or 14 years old, and the modal age was 15. (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Ybarra, 2008). In general, adolescents are savvy about their online contacts from unknown individuals (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007) and take precautions regarding their privacy. However, age restrictions for online networking sites are easy to circumvent (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008 & 2010).