

*Online grooming: Findings from a decade of research about online crimes in the U.S.*

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***3 National Juvenile Online  
Victimization (NJOV) Studies***

Interviews with police about technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation crimes ending in arrest:

- ▶ **NJOV1**: 612 interviews, arrests between July 1, 2000 & June 30, 2001
- ▶ **NJOV2**: 1,051 interviews, arrests during 2006
- ▶ **NJOV3** : 1,299 interviews, arrests in 2009

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## Overview

- ▶ Is online grooming a new type of sex crime?
- ▶ Is the population of online groomers changing?
- ▶ Are we seeing new patterns of behavior by online groomers?
- ▶ Are sex offenses increasing because of online grooming?

### *CCRC research has consistently found that groomers who meet victims online typically ...*

- ▶ Target adolescents
  - Mostly girls
- ▶ Are open about wanting sex & being adults, usually
- ▶ Seduce or otherwise find willing victims
- ▶ Victims are too young to consent to sexual activity
- ▶ Contact sex offenses in about 2/3 of cases



### ***Cases are diverse: Example***

- ▶ Marcy's parents found nude pictures of her on her computer. Marcy, 14, admitted sending the pictures to Ellis, a 37 year old man she met online.
- ▶ Ellis was communicating with numerous adolescent girls. Police identified several victims aged 12 to 16. He targeted vulnerable girls who struggled with self image; many were over-weight or had skin problems. Victims told police that Ellis "made them feel good."
- ▶ He did not meet any of his victims face-to-face. He had a large collection of child pornography on his computer.

### ***Cases are diverse: Example***

- ▶ Adam, 21, got Cindy's phone number from a friend. Adam and Cindy, 12, texted back and forth for several days and exchanged nude photos. Cindy's mother found Adam's photo and reported the case to police.
- ▶ When police searched Adam's phone, they found the pictures of Cindy, nude pictures of Adam's fiancée and adult pornography videos. On Cindy's phone they found the pictures of Adam and of her and a video of her having sex with another minor.

### *Cases are diverse: Example*

- ▶ Tom, age 19, and Lori, age 12, met through a social networking site. For 2 years, they talked online and by cell phone and occasionally met and did things together.
- ▶ When Lori was 14 and Tom 21, they were discovered together in the backseat of a car having sex.

### *Cases are diverse: Example*

- ▶ Kurt, 56, met Alice, 13, thru a social networking site. Alice said she was 18. They talked online for several months and exchanged nude photos. Alice had severe conflicts with her mother. When Kurt asked why she didn't move out, Alice admitted she was 13. Kurt drove to her house to "rescue" her. The crime was discovered when police stopped Kurt for a traffic violation and found Alice in the car.
- ▶ Kurt was divorced and had 4 adult children. There was no evidence of any prior sexual offenses or criminal behavior.

## *Is online grooming a new form of sexual abuse?*

About 25% of reports of sex crimes against minors involve statutory rape\*

- ▶ Nonforcible sex crime
- ▶ Most victims 13 to 15
- ▶ Underage – too young to consent to sexual activity
  - Age of consent is 16 in most states



\*Troupe-Leasure & Snyder

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## *Statutory Rape*

- ▶ Participation of youth is voluntary – but voluntary in varying degrees
- ▶ Young adolescents have
  - Little experience with romance & intimacy
  - Less ability to negotiate with partners about sexual activity
  - Higher rates of coerced intercourse
  - Higher rates of unprotected sex, STDs, pregnancy
- ▶ But some youth aggressively pursue sex with adults

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### ***Some youth are aggressive: Examples***

- ▶ A 17-year-old girl contacted a local man, age 23, through a social networking site. She invited him to “party” with her & her sister, 14, while their parents were away.
- ▶ A 15-year old boy was discovered having sex with a man, 23. The boy had contacted the man online. He had done this before. The police investigator described the 15-year-old victim as “unfazed” at being caught.

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### ***Is the population of online groomers changing?***

- ▶ In 2000, most offenders who used the Internet to meet underage victims (75%) were older than 25 and many possessed child pornography (40%)
- ▶ In 2009, half were 25 or younger
- ▶ About 15% possessed child pornography

## *Is the population of online groomers changing?*

There has been much attention to groomers who meet victims online

- ▶ But most sex offenders target youth they know in person
- ▶ Increasingly, offenders who are family members or in-person acquaintances of victims are using technology to groom

## *Family & acquaintance (F&A) online groomers*

F&A groomers use the Internet similarly to groomers who meet victims online

- Develop private relationships, set up meetings
- Introduce sex into relationship
- Solicit & transmit photos
- Sometimes use deceit

### ***F&A online groomer: Example***

- ▶ A man, age 31, used his step-daughter's buddy list to contact one of her friends, age 16. They exchanged online messages that were highly sexual. The victim did not realize she was communicating with her friend's step-father. He had a social networking site where he claimed to be 15. Her's was sexually suggestive.

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### ***Is online grooming behavior changing?***

- ▶ In 2009, about 1/3 of F&A cases involved grooming via images and text messages on cell phones

### ***F&A groomers using cell phones***

- ▶ A man, 30, sent a nude picture of himself to his girlfriend's daughter, 14. The girl might have become involved with him, but her foster mother found the picture on her cell phone and reported the incident.
- ▶ A boy, 16, met a man, 47, in a technology store. They chatted & exchanged cell phone #s. The man texted sexual advances to the boy, who told his father, who told police. The man was a registered sex offender.

### ***Is online grooming behavior changing?***

In 2009

- ▶ About 1/3 of online grooming cases included youth-produced sexual images
  - Both groomers who met victims online and F&A groomers

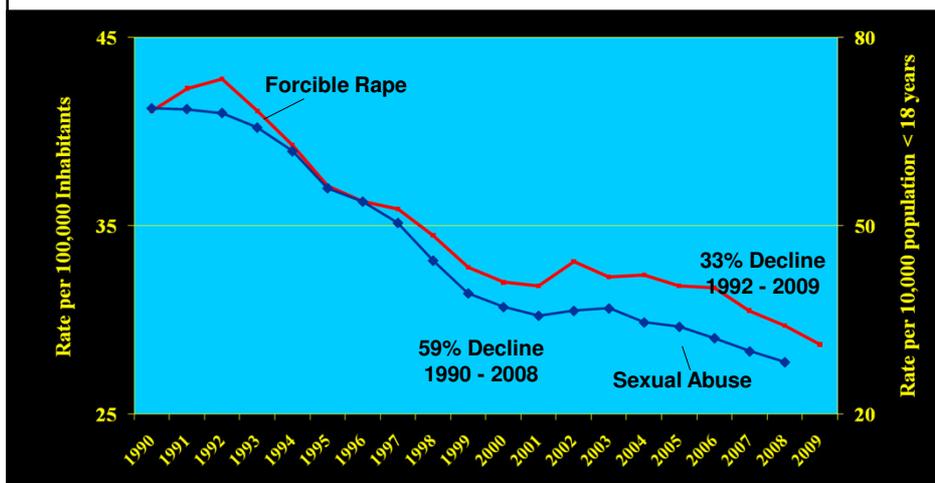
### *Definition: Youth-produced sexual images*

#### Images

- ▶ Created by minors (age 17 or younger)
- ▶ Depicting self or other minors
- ▶ Are or could be child pornography under applicable criminal statutes
  - Includes creation, distribution or possession
  - Technology-facilitated (e.g., cell phone, webcam, digital camera)

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### *Are sex offenses increasing because of online grooming?*



\*Source: FBI, Crime in the United States Reports and NCANDS

## *Are sex offenses increasing because of online grooming?*

In the United States

- ▶ Sexual abuse is ***declining***, not increasing
- ▶ Most youth are not vulnerable to online grooming
- ▶ The Internet may have some protective aspects
- ▶ Using the Internet may make sex offenders more visible to law enforcement

\*Pew Internet & American Life Project, Nov. 2011

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## *Some conclusions about online groomers*

- ▶ The Internet facilitates certain types of sexual offenses
  - Non-forcible (sexual advances, grooming, seduction)
  - Non-contact (no attempt to meet, voyeuristic)
  - Offenses that involve images (CP production)
- ▶ Sexual offending may be migrating to the Internet, along with many other behaviors
- ▶ Distinctions between online and family & acquaintance groomers may not be relevant when we consider how to educate & protect young people

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### ***What to do? Support candid prevention education***

- ▶ Aim prevention at adolescents –
  - Youth in middle and high school (not parents)
    - Different messages for different ages
  - Acknowledge teen interests & independence
  - Acknowledge teen interest in sex, romantic fantasy
  - Don't leave out older youth – those 16 & 17
- ▶ Don't over emphasize violence and deception
- ▶ Educate youth about all sex crimes

### ***What to do? Support comprehensive prevention education***

Not just online safety –

- ▶ Adolescents, particularly girls, suffer high rates of sexual victimization
- ▶ Most perpetrators are family members or face-to-face acquaintances of victims
- ▶ Many perpetrators are peers
- ▶ Make sure health, youth service and education professionals know how to talk to adolescents about sexual victimization
- ▶ Target at risk populations of youth

Many NJOV Study papers and reports are available at our website:

[www.unh.edu/ccrc](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc)

We welcome inquiries about our research.

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