

INTERNET USAGE AND CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

A rapidly growing problem for parents and law enforcement alike is crimes against children perpetrated through the use of the Internet. As we entered this century the use of the Internet became available to almost every household and now almost every child from elementary school age on has Internet access at school, home, and through cellular telephones. With this increase in Internet usage by children law enforcement agencies have begun to receive more and more complaints from parents who have discovered an adult has been conducting inappropriate if not illegal Internet contact with their children. However, due to a lack of personnel and finances dedicated to this type of investigations, very few law enforcement agencies take an active role in investigating these types of crimes.

In order to determine the needs of our communities in this regard, we need to determine how the youth in our jurisdictions are using the Internet access through cellular telephones and text messaging. This paper will discuss research conducted in the Mid-Missouri area regarding Junior High School age youth and their use of this technology.

In January 2007 the Mid-Missouri Internet Crimes Task Force was established to investigate Internet crimes against children and to provide investigative, forensic, and technical support to law enforcement and prosecuting attorneys in a seven county region in Mid-Missouri. Part of our goal is to stop people from perpetrating these crimes and to educate parents on how to help reduce the likelihood their children will be victimized. If we can gain knowledge of how our children are using technology and how perpetrators are also using technology to victimize them, we as a society, law enforcement, parents, schools, legislature, and others, will have a better understanding of how to better use our resources to protect our children and families.

HISTORY

In 1999 a detective with the Boone County Sheriff's Department began investigating Internet based crimes including fraud and the possession and distribution of child pornography. In October 2004 the department began conducting covert investigations into child enticement and was amazed at the extent of the problem. While working only about one fourth of the time on this project eleven people were arrested and charged for various Internet crimes against children between October 2004 and June 2005. These suspects were charged with a variety of crimes including attempting to promote obscenity, enticement of a child, and statutory rape.

One of the lessons law enforcement learned is that the people perpetrating these crimes often do not fit the profile we seem to expect. Most are white males who are well educated and have good jobs or own their own businesses. Since these perpetrators often travel a distance to meet a child, they are relatively anonymous especially after instructing their child victim how to avoid leaving evidence on the child's computer. Remember that even though the child undoubtedly agrees to the meeting, the perpetrator is committing a serious crime that could have disastrous results. Imagine a twelve to fourteen-year-old girl getting pregnant, getting a sexually transmitted disease, being injured, abducted, or even murdered during one of these incidents.

Child enticement is not the only risk our children face as a result of their increased Internet usage, however. Both adult and child pornography is being sent to our children over the Internet, including cell phones, at an increasingly alarming rate. Strangers known only through Internet contacts are trying to convince children to take sexually graphic photographs or videos of themselves and send the images to the Internet friend. Often these photographs and videos end up all over the Internet.

In January 2007 the Mid-Missouri Internet Crimes Task Force was established to investigate Internet crimes against children and to provide investigative, forensic, and technical support to law enforcement and prosecuting attorneys in a seven county region in Mid-Missouri. Part of our goal is to stop people from perpetrating these crimes and to educate parents on how to help reduce the likelihood their child will be victimized. As a result we decided to research how junior high school children are using the Internet and how many are actually being approached over the Internet. We know that pedophiles will always be looking for victims and that the Internet makes their search easier.

RESEARCH METHOD

Thirty nine area schools in Boone, Cooper, Howard, Randolph, Audrain, Callaway, and Cole counties in Mid-Missouri who have Junior High School age students were asked to participate in this program. Nineteen schools chose to participate. Each school was provided a survey containing twenty-seven questions on Internet and cell phone usage. Participating schools were requested to have students in general academic classes complete the surveys and to ask the participating students to only identify themselves by sex and age and to answer the questions honestly.

A total of 2,264 students completed the surveys of which 1,145 were boys and 1,119 were girls. Participating students varied in age from twelve to sixteen with the average age being 13.7 years. The survey covered four general areas. General Internet access, general Internet usage, cell phones, and inappropriate Internet contacts. This

paper primarily focuses on children with Internet access in their home, however, realizing youth have a variety of resources to access this technology.

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

According to the 2006 estimated census information from the U.S. Census Bureau, Missouri has an estimated population of 1,413,983 who are seventeen years of age or younger, 51.1% of which are female. The seven counties in Mid-Missouri served by the Mid-Missouri Internet Crimes Task Force have an estimated population of approximately 340,983 of which approximately 77,736 are seventeen years of age or younger.

DATA

94.6% off all students reported having at least one computer in their home with the average being two computers in the home. Of those with computers in the home 92.1% have Internet access. 61.8% of those with Internet in the home reported having specific rules regarding Internet usage.

1) INTERNET CHATTING

54.5% of the girls reported having been in Internet Chat rooms while 59.5% of the boys reported such usage. Of those using chat rooms 87.1% of the girls and 78.6% of the boys reported having been in private chat rooms. Of those using chat rooms, 72.9% of the girls and 71% of the boys report chatting daily. The following charts show where the participants reported they chat.

Girls with Internet in home

MySpace	95.4%
MSN	61.8%
Yahoo	60.7%
Facebook	50.1%
AIM	46.1%
AOL	28.8%
Other	10.7%

Boys with Internet in home

Myspace	79.4%
MSN	40.5%
Yahoo	40%
Facebook	35.3%
AIM	33.5%
AOL	17.7%
Other	10.9

2) SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

80.2% of those surveyed with Internet in the home have a social networking site. Myspace is the most popular site with 74% of the girls and 75.6% of the boys using this site. Facebook was a clear second with 40.5% of the girls and 31.6% of the boys having this site. 73% of the girls reported having a personal profile with 86% of those having their picture displayed and 84.8% having their age displayed. 61.6% of the boys reported having a personal profile with 77% of those displaying their picture and 83.6% giving their age. Of the kids having a social networking site such as Myspace or Facebook the girls averaged 131.3 people on their friends list while boys averaged 110.

Girls with Internet in home		Boys with Internet in home	
MySpace	74.0%	MySpace	75.6%
Facebook	40.5%	Facebook	31.6%
Personal Profile	73.0%	Personal Profile	61.6%
Picture Displayed on Profile	86.0%	Picture Displayed on Profile	77.0%
Age Displayed on Profile	84.8%	Age Displayed on Profile	83.6%
Average number of friends	131	Average number of friends	110

3) CELL PHONE USAGE

80.4% of the girls and 71.6% of the boys reported having cell phones. 80.4% of the cell phones possessed by girls contain cameras while 77.9% of the boys cell phones have cameras. 13.4% of girls with cell phones and 15% of boys have text messaged with people they met on the Internet. 30.5% of girls with cells and 21.5% of boys have had internet strangers ask for their phone number or ask the child to call.

9.5% of all girls surveyed, 11% of the girls with Internet in the home, and 11.8% of the girls with cell phones reported having given out their phone numbers to strangers they met on the Internet. 10.3% of all boys, 11.8% of boys with Internet in the home, and 14.5% of the boys with cell phones reported giving their phone numbers to strangers they met on the Internet.

Girls		Boys	
Have cell phone	80.4%	Have cell phone	71.6%
Contains camera	80.4%	Contains camera	77.9%
Texted with people met on net	13.4%	Texted with people met on net	15.0%
Person met on Internet asked for number	30.5%	Person met on Internet asked for number	21.5%
Given number to person met on Internet	11.8%	Given number to person met on Internet	14.5%

4) PORNOGRAHY

26% of the girls with Internet in their homes reported having someone they met on the Net ask the girl to send them a photograph of herself with 16.6% of the boys having been asked to send a photo. 21% of the girls and 22.9% of the boys report having a web cam with 36.7% of those girls and 42.1% of those boys reporting they have used a web cam while chatting with someone they met on the Internet.

12% of the girls and 6.9% of the boys were asked to send naked or partially naked photographs of themselves. 10% of the girls and 15.7% of the boys have had someone intentionally send them pornography over the Internet or cell phone.

Girls with Internet in home		Boys with Internet in home	
Person met on Internet asked to send picture	26.0%	Person met on Internet asked to send picture	16.6%
Have web cam	21.0%	Have web cam	22.9%
Asked to send pornographic photos of themselves	12.0%	Asked to send pornographic photos of themselves	6.9%
Had someone send them pornography	10.0%	Had someone send them pornography	15.7%

5) SEXUAL CHAT

22% of the girls with Internet in their home reported having engaged in conversations about sex or sexual touching either through the Internet or text messaging with people they first met over the Internet. This overall number was considerably higher in Columbia schools where 27.6% of the girls reported having engaged in such activity.

16.4% of the boys with Internet in their homes reported having engaged in these conversations with strangers. The following chart shows where these conversations are mostly likely to occur.

Girls		Boys	
Myspace	52.5%	Text Messaging	55.7%
Text Messaging	49.3%	Myspace	50.3%
Chat Rooms	48.3%	Chat Rooms	35.1%
Facebook	17%	Facebook	Invalid dat
Other	10.3%	Other	7.3%

6) BULLIED OR HARASSED ON LINE

Of the girls with Internet in their homes 17% reported having been bullied or harassed on line while 9.2% of the boys reporting having been bullied.

Where girls reported being bullied		Where boys reported being bullied	
Myspace	53%	Myspace	35.4%
Chat Room	28.9%	Chat Room	35.4%
Text Messaging	25.3%	Text Messaging	18.2%
Facebook	14.4%	Facebook	9.6%
Other	7.2%	Other	12.9%

7) MEETING STRANGERS

18% of the girls and 15.5% of the boys with Internet in their homes reported having been asked by someone they met on the Internet to meet them in person. Of those asked to meet 73.1% of the girls reported actually meeting the person they met over the Internet. This means that approximately 11.4% of all the girls with Internet in the home and 13.6% of all the boys with Internet in the home reported actually having met someone in person that they first met on the Internet. 21.4% of both boys and girls meeting these strangers reported the people they met were 18 years of age or older with 6.6% being over 21 years of age.

Girls with Internet in home		Boys with Internet in home	
Asked by a person they met over the Internet to meet in person	18.0%	Asked by a person they met over the Internet to meet in person	15.5%
Actually met a person they met over the Internet	11.4%	Actually met a person they met over the Internet	13.6%

CONCLUSIONS

Information obtained from this study indicates that even young teenagers have access to the Internet and technology that puts them in contact with strangers and potentially dangerous situations. This data also indicates that a substantial number of these teens are becoming involved in very dangerous and often illegal activities through this technology to include pornography, Internet harassment, and meeting strangers.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

A few concerns exist with this research in that it is non scientific in nature. Information was received solely from written surveys without the benefit of corresponding interviews. Secondly since no follow up interviews were conducted one must presume the participant understood the question and answered knowledgeably. Lastly this type of survey does not safeguard against a participant supplying false answers. Even with these considerations I feel the information obtained from this survey accurately reflects the extent of the problem and assists both law enforcement and parents in determining strategies to face this issue.

IMPLICATIONS

Although this data was gained from young teens in Mid-Missouri it is most likely representative of youth across Missouri. This data also seems to indicate that the dangers to our youth through Internet usage and technology are not decreasing and that the likelihood of them becoming victims is substantial.

The information gained from this survey shows the need for continuing research to be conducted at the local level to totally understand the depth of this problem. Secondly we must take the opportunity to educate both parents and children of the dangers of the Internet including cyber bullying, pornography, engaging in sexual chat, and meeting "Strangers" for any reason. Law enforcement administrators must recognize Internet crimes against children as a priority and be willing to dedicate resources both in terms of personnel and finances to the investigation of these types of offenses.

Administrators must also support the expansion of task forces at the local level to

combat this type of crime that knows no jurisdictional boundaries. All areas of the criminal justice system must work together to realize successful prosecution with sufficient punishment for the offenders. And lastly, the community must fully support this effort by talking with their kids, setting rules for Internet usage, supporting local criminal justice efforts, and by demanding that law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, and governmental bodies enact competent legislation, and enforce those laws vigorously.

About the author:

Andy Anderson is the Coordinator of the Mid-Missouri Internet Crimes Task Force and a twenty-three year veteran of the Boone County Sheriff's Department in Columbia, Missouri. He is a 1995 graduate of the FBI National Academy and has over twenty-one years in the Detective Unit investigating crimes against children. Currently he investigates Internet crimes, conducts covert and reactive Internet investigations, and is a computer forensic examiner. Anderson has served on numerous boards and civic organizations that focus on child abuse and child advocacy issues.

Editor:

Dr. Nancy Fedorchak is a Registered Nurse with a Masters Degree in Counseling Psychology and a Doctoral Degree in Education. Dr. Fedorchak has worked for over twenty-five years in public education and is currently on staff at the University of Central Missouri.