

**How Safe is
Cyberspace:
An
Overview**

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- *Child Lured By Predator Online.*
- *Feds Seize Computers and Software In International Child Porn Sting.*
- *Computer Repair Shop Reports Kiddie Porn to Local Authorities.*

Headlines like these are all too common in this, the Information Age. Rarely can one open a newspaper and not find an article detailing the illicit use of computers and the Internet. While this new medium has offered opportunities for children and adults alike to search libraries, peruse international galleries, chat with friends and family, and purchase books, music, and games with a click of the mouse, it has also availed its strengths to those who prey on children. This "darker side" of the Internet has allowed criminals to meet, network, and commit crimes stretching across state and even international boundaries. The Information Superhighway is not patrolled by a local police department preventing crimes within its jurisdiction. The speed of modems, incredible advances in modern technology, and the number of users online have blurred traditional jurisdictional boundaries. With these new challenges facing law enforcement, thousands are left asking, "Whose job is it to protect our children online?"

It is estimated that approximately 30 million U.S. households have computers in their homes. Of these, 10 to 15 million have the capability to go online. Forecasters predict approximately 45 million households will have Internet access by the millennium, and recent figures indicate that currently 10.5 million children use online services. The usage time by teens 16-17 years of age illustrates that 32% of these youth spend five or more hours online per week. (Pike, 1998).

In a time when parents are relying on children to program VCRs, online usage by children often goes misunderstood by adults. Many parents' inability to operate a computer, let alone navigate the Internet and World Wide Web, has created an electronic daycare for children worldwide. Many parents believe that their children are safe in their own home while on the computer; however, the growing number of Internet crimes against children indicates a need to reevaluate that sense of security.

Online subscribers can now establish electronic mail accounts (e-mail) free of charge and use them to send and receive messages with users worldwide, reaching into the living rooms, bedrooms, and homes of families around the globe. "Chat" rooms attract millions of visitors daily, with every topic from Fans of Barney to Adult Sexual Encounters, and virtually

no one "checking for ID" at their doors. Many people believe that children are safe in rooms with more juvenile topics, such as Teen Idols and Barbie Chat, when in fact predators can be lurking in these seemingly benign "neighborhoods" on the Internet. Newsgroups and, Bulletin Boards, and the World Wide Web are flooded daily with postings of "free pics" and "teenage sex" topics, luring the curious to download or trade the files, or engage in further conversation. One may scroll through the thousands of listings in these news groups or in chat rooms as early as 6:00 am and find people from all over the world, engaged in a particular, explicit, perversion online. Has the Information Age created a new type of criminal that law enforcement must combat? Has it created a new crime that traditional law enforcement is ill-equipped to handle? The answer, simply put, is no.

Crimes against children have occurred for decades, if not centuries. For years children have been dubbed as "perfect victims." They are often too trusting, seeking attention, affection, or material possessions, and most of all are often not viewed as credible witnesses. The same assumptions apply today. The online predator now has the ability to invisibly or anonymously lure children from the confines of his or her own home, collecting information from children online, searching profiles of potential victims, and gathering an arsenal of personal information on

specific children within a few moments. The process of victimization, however, remains the same. Using information gathered online, the perpetrator targets a child victim. An online friendship is initiated with the child, which includes shared hobbies and interests, and possibly leads to the sending of gifts and pictures. The online predator may groom the child, all the while building trust until eventually even attempting to arrange for a meeting. Child Exploitation Units in law enforcement have battled this traditional grooming process for years, long before the emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web. The new challenge is simply applying the same investigative, interviewing, and interrogation skills to Internet crimes against children, where playgrounds must now include chat rooms. Same crime, different medium.

Understanding this assimilation, it becomes apparent that law enforcement must have the support of communities, businesses, technology, parents, and state, local and federal government to successfully make this electronic transition. Many blocking and screening tools have been created (see the article in this issue by Gallo); however, the rapid growth of the Information Age makes it virtually impossible to keep

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these devices adequately updated. Many communities have applied a multi-disciplinary approach to resolving these cases, while others have relied more heavily on federal support when faced with a potential Internet child exploitation case. Several state and local task forces have been created to take a preventive approach to protecting children online, some even conduct online undercover operations. But, where else can communities turn for assistance?

Resources For Communities

In December 1997, approximately 650 participants representing 300 organizations gathered for the Internet Online Summit: Focus on the Children. The Summit addressed ways to make the Internet a safe and educational experience for children. Attorney General Janet Reno addressed the summit and spoke of the U.S. Department of Justice's commitment to assist local, state, and federal initiatives to enhance the safety of children online. Since the summit much progress has been made.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) created the Exploited Child Unit (ECU) as a cooperative agreement between the U.S. Department of Treasury and NCMEC. ECU maintains and has access to several databases containing valuable information, including law enforcement personnel with expertise in the field of child exploitation, state and federal task forces, public records, and private sector resources.

Another function of the ECU is to operate NCMEC's CyberTipline, www.missingkids.com/cybertipline, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice. The CyberTipline, established in March 1998, handles online leads from individuals reporting the sexual exploitation of children. The reports coming from children and adults alike have totaled more than 2,600 to date. Reports include information on child pornography, child prostitution, child sexual tourism, extra-familial child sexual exploitation, and online enticement of children. The form at this site enables the user to report information on the inappropriate behavior of an online user, a particular web site, or any incident where the individual is or believes that someone else may be in danger. Once completed, the form is sent electronically to ECU analysts who review and validate the reports before submitting them to the appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation and follow-up. The ECU has developed software programs to help law enforcement agencies obtain investigative information on the Internet. The ECU has also produced informative publications for children, parents, and communities nationwide on the topic of child and teen safety on the Information Highway.

NCMEC has developed two training programs to assist professionals with the identification and investigation of Internet crimes against children. Protecting Children Online is a four and one-half day course administered by Fox Valley Technical College, and delivered regionally throughout the country. The

Protecting Children Online-Unit Commander course is a two and one-half day course offered at NCMEC in Arlington, Virginia. The course is directed towards developing or enhancing child exploitation units to include Internet crimes against children.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) of the U.S. Department of Justice has also made a commitment to help local law enforcement address the problem of Internet crimes against children. OJJDP recently awarded ten communities grants of up to \$300,000 each to create or enhance local and state task forces to combat Internet crimes against children.

Additional federal responses and resources for protecting children online include the FBI, U.S. Customs Service, and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. Each of these federal law enforcement agencies works in concert with NCMEC's CyberTipline.

The FBI's Innocent Images Operation located in Calverton, Maryland, has been designated as the FBI's central operation for all online child pornography/child sexual exploitation investigations. The United States Customs Service International Child Pornography Investigation and Coordination Center acts as the front line defense to combat the illegal generation, importation, and proliferation of child pornography. The U.S. Postal Inspection Service also assists in the fight to protect children online by dealing with the transmission of child pornography by use of the United States mail. With the emergence of illicit web sites advertising child pornographic material for sale, the U.S. Postal Service has been instrumental in tracking down such purchases that are sent by mail.

With such emphasis being placed on the importance of combating crimes against children online at the local, state, and federal levels, it is crucial that these efforts exist and progress collaboratively with one another. Clearly the responsibility of preventing and resolving Internet crimes against children is not merely a federal or a local issue. Technology has demonstrated it to be a global responsibility, a border-less crime. By utilizing the available training initiatives, drawing from the experience of successful task forces and units, informing communities and agencies about the many existing resources available, and having parents taking a more active role, perhaps we can make the journey through cyberspace safer for children.

Reference

Pike J. (1998), Cyberstats, Federation of American Scientists
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