# Online Predators: Myth vs. Reality

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# Online Predators - The Myth

#### Online predators are pedophiles who

- Lie about their identities, ages & motives
- Trick children into divulging personal information or use information their victims have naively posted
- Stalk, abduct and forcibly assault victims





### Online Predators - The Reality

- Victims are adolescents
- Deceit is rare
  - Few offenders lie about their ages
  - Few hide their sexual intentions
  - Most seduce their victims
- Meetings and sex most often are voluntary
  - Sexual encounters are often repeated
- Many victims feel love or close friendship for offenders
- Stalking, abduction and violence are uncommon
- Most offenders are charged with nonforcible crimes
  - Sex with underage youth (statutory rape)



## Online Predators – The Reality

#### The typical online molester

- Not a pedophile
- Not really a stranger
  - Often develops a relationship with victim
- May know the victim in person (coach, neighbor, family friend)
  - Most sex offenders target youth they know in person
  - No evidence these incidents are less harmful or disturbing



# Are we seeing a new type of crime?

About one-quarter of reports of sex crimes against minors involve <u>statutory rape</u>\*

- Nonforcible sex crime
- Most victims 13 to 15
- Underage too young to consent to sexual activity



\*Troupe-Leasure & Snyder, 2005



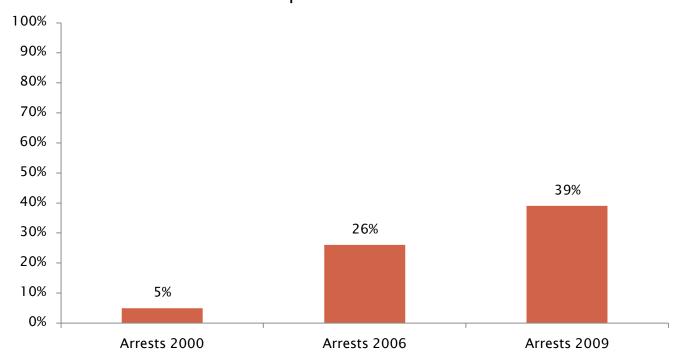
### Statutory Rape

- 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



# Increase in adult sex offenders soliciting sexual images from adolescent victims

"Adult involved" cases of youth-produced sexual images -- % of arrests for child pornography production





### Youth-produced sexual images

- Images created by minors (age 17 or younger) that are or could be child pornography under applicable criminal statutes
  - Also known as "sexting"
- Most youth are <u>not</u> sexting
  - About 1% appeared in or created a sexually explicit image in the past year
- Most arrests involve adults that solicit or entice youth to create and send them pictures



### Case Example

The victim was 14. Her parents found nude pictures on her computer. She admitted sending the pictures to a 37 year old man she met online. Police identified 8 or 9 victims ages 12 to 16 that had sent him sexual images. The offender targeted vulnerable girls who struggled with self image. Victims told police that he "made them feel good." He did not meet any of his victims face-to-face.



### Case Example

- The offender, 32, created a fictitious modeling agency. He used a social networking site to solicit girls, ages 11 through 17, to pose nude. He sent them pornography to show them poses, and he paid for the pictures. He was discovered when a youth overheard one of the victims bragging about the money she made.
- The offender, 38, seduced and sexually abused his step-niece, 14. She stayed in his home. They created and exchanged numerous sexual images.



# What puts youth at risk? The Stereotype

Children or young adolescents, who get in trouble by

- Being naive and inexperienced about the Internet
- Talking online to people they don't know in person
- Posting personal information
- Using new media (social networking sites, twitter, geo-location devices)



## What puts youth at risk? Reality

- Histories of physical or sexual abuse
- Delinquency, depression, social interaction problems
- Poor relationships with parents
- Sexual orientation issues
- A high level of indiscriminate, interactive Internet and cell phone use
- Talking online to strangers about sex



## What to do? Don't panic!

- In 2011, 95% of youth ages 12-17 used the Internet\*
- Sexual abuse is declining, not increasing
- Most youth are not vulnerable to online molesters
- 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



# 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 sex crimes, including child pornography



# 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-toface acquaintances of victims, including peers
- Make sure health, youth service and education professionals know how to talk to adolescents about sexual victimization
- Target at risk populations of youth



# We welcome inquiries about our research <u>Janis.Wolak@unh.edu</u>

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