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Youth at Risk: Part 1, 2012 Massachusetts Family Impact Seminar

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Youth at Risk: Part 1, 2012 Massachusetts Family Impact Seminar

Abstract

The youth of Massachusetts are of primary concern to legislators and citizens. This briefing report features three essays by experts – Lisa Jones, Ramon Borges-Mendez, and Janis Wolak – who focus on three aspects of youth wellbeing: youth victimization and other indicators of psychological health, youth unemployment, and online sexual predators of youth. Although youth well-being is of primary concern, the worrisome stories about crimes against children that regularly fill the media have unfortunately obscured some more positive news from statistical reports on these same issues. Child victimizations of various types – i.e., child sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, child physical abuse, sexual assaults of teenagers, physical assaults and robberies of teenagers, and homicides of teenagers – have been declining nationwide and in Massachusetts since the early 1990s, in some cases declining dramatically.

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society

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2012 MASSACHUSETTS FAMILY IMPACT SEMINAR



YOUTH at Risk: Part 1



CLARK UNIVERSITY
Mosakowski Institute for
Public Enterprise

YOUTH at Risk: Part 1

2012 MASSACHUSETTS FAMILY IMPACT SEMINAR

BRIEFING REPORT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Purpose and Presenters

4 Executive Summary

7 A Checklist for Assessing the Impact of Policies on Families

10 Acknowledgements

11 How are Youth Doing? Trends in Youth Victimization and Well-Being and Implications for Youth Policy

By Lisa M. Jones, Ph.D., with the assistance of Rashmi Nair and Michelle Collett

20 Global and Local Youth Unemployment: Dislocation and Pathways

By Ramon Borges-Mendez, Ph.D., with the assistance of Lillian Denhardt and Michelle Collett

28 Online Predators — Myth versus Reality

By Janis Wolak, J.D., with the assistance of Lindsey Evans, Stephanie Nguyen, and Denise A. Hines, Ph.D.



Purpose and Presenters

In 2009, Clark University was accepted as the university to represent Massachusetts in the National Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars at the University of Wisconsin – Madison (<http://familyimpactseminars.org>). Family Impact Seminars are a series of annual seminars, briefing reports, and discussion sessions that provide up-to-date, solution-oriented research on current issues for state legislators and their staffs. The seminars provide objective, nonpartisan research on current issues and do not lobby for particular policies. Seminar participants discuss policy options and identify common ground where it exists.

Youth at Risk: Part 1 is the third Massachusetts Family Impact Seminar, and the first in a series to focus on the well-being of youth in the Commonwealth. Today's seminar is designed to emphasize a family perspective in policymaking on issues related to youth well-being, employment, and victimization within the Commonwealth. In general, Family Impact Seminars analyze the consequences an issue, policy, or program may have for families.

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Executive Summary

By Denise A. Hines, Ph.D.

The youth of Massachusetts are of primary concern to legislators and citizens. This briefing report features three essays by experts – Lisa Jones, Ramon Borges-Mendez, and Janis Wolak – who focus on three aspects of youth well-being: youth victimization and other indicators of psychological health, youth unemployment, and online sexual predators of youth.

Although youth well-being is of primary concern, the worrisome stories about crimes against children that regularly fill the media have unfortunately obscured some more positive news from statistical reports on these same issues. Child victimizations of various types – i.e., child sexual abuse, witnessing domestic violence, child physical abuse, sexual assaults of teenagers, physical assaults and robberies of teenagers, and homicides of teenagers – have been declining nationwide and in Massachusetts since the early 1990s, in some cases declining dramatically.

Similar trends have also been noticed in areas of maladjustment, such as fighting in school, suicide, teenage birth rates, early sexual initiation, running away, and drug use. These downward trends continue even in the midst of continuing difficult economic times.

However, not much focus has gone into showcasing these achievements, which not only continues to give a lopsided picture of the reality, but also limits our understanding of the reasons behind these trends that would, in turn, help us further such efforts in an informed manner.

Although the nature of these findings is largely encouraging, they may lead one to believe that this topic has received much attention and that we can finally rest. However, that is a dangerous position to assume because it is likely to cause the rates to increase again to their initial high points. Currently, something positive is going on in the social environment. Three hypotheses seem to have the most support for explaining these downward trends:

- (1) The increased involvement of police and other social change agents in youth victimization** (e.g., social workers, child protection workers, specialized domestic violence units, specialized sexual assault officers, specialized school resource officers, and mental health professionals who focus on social control issues);
- (2) Advances in mental health treatment and psychopharmacology**, which at the same time have become easier for the public to access and advanced around the same time that indicators of child victimization began to improve. Such advances may have had the effect of alleviating predictors of aggressive behaviors, such as depression, discouragement, despair, and stress; and
- (3) Changing norms, practices, and laws**, in that a broad range of opinion leaders drew attention to these issues at the same time that the population was becoming more educated in general and more exposed to the points of view of these leaders; moreover, laws were being instituted to reinforce society's stance that these behaviors were wrong.

What is required is for researchers, policymakers, and active social agents to continue to invest in the practices that are working while being alert to other burgeoning issues.

One such burgeoning issue is youth unemployment. Although declining rates of indicators of youth maladjustment have persisted despite economic declines, the continuing economic troubles have had a strong impact on youth employment and their future economic well-being.

National studies show that early employment experiences shape youth's earning potential for the rest of their lifetime. Youth unemployment rates, however, have recently reached highs that have not been seen since 1948. Youth unemployment rates for workers ages 16-24 peaked at 19.2% in September of 2009. Youth are now two times more likely to be unemployed than adult workers, and although youth only comprise 13.5% of the workforce, they represent 26.4% of the unemployed.

An additional concern is that rising unemployment rates do not affect all youth equally. The recession has exacerbated racial disparities, putting minority youth out of work more often than their white peers.

Half of Massachusetts' Latino residents are under the age of 24, and although their labor force participation rates have been increasing since 1970, Latino youth are still less likely to be in the labor force at any given time than White or African-American youth. This means that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to building skills that will help them increase their lifetime earning potential.

The economic situation has steadily deteriorated for young African American men. Incarceration rates are still on the rise for young African American men. Many of these young men face employment challenges that can contribute to their criminal behavior. When they get out of prison, their criminal history often complicates their employment prospects even more.

Being unemployed as a young person, especially for a long time, can have long-lasting effects. While a young person may eventually find a job, having been unemployed raises the probability that they will become unemployed again. Instability like this damages their lifetime earning potential more than it would for an adult who experiences a period of unemployment.

In 2009, the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board released a report that made three recommendations:

- (1) Increase the number and quality of work experiences and career exploration activities for both in-school and out-of-school youth.
- (2) Organize and strengthen collaboration among education, workforce, and human service agencies at both the state and regional levels.
- (3) Pilot a "multiple pathways" approach in selected regions that combines the education, workforce development, and human service support necessary to address the state's dropout crisis by creating new avenues to educational attainment, economic security, and upward mobility for all youth.

There are many programs in the state that have been engaging in these kinds of efforts and would be worth supporting. Moreover, several bills – including H.540, H.2712, H.2871, and S.971 – propose ideas that would bolster youth employment prospects. Finally, other countries have adopted ideas that may prove useful in reducing youth unemployment, such as bonuses, benefits, and/or preferential treatment for firms that employ apprentices.

Another area of growing concern focuses on youth Internet use. Legislators, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens are increasingly worried about youth being victimized online. However, national research data suggest that the problems with youth Internet safety may be less widespread and dire than news reports and anecdotes suggest.

Nonetheless, arrests for Internet-initiated sex crimes against children increased 21% between 2000 and 2006. Although arrests of online predators are increasing, the facts do not suggest that the Internet is facilitating an epidemic of sex crimes against youth. Rather, increasing arrests for online predation reflect increasing rates of youth Internet use, a migration of crime from offline to online venues, and the growth of law enforcement activity against online crimes.

Moreover, the research on online predators shows that our stereotypes of who they are and what they do are largely inaccurate. Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters. Most such offenders are charged with crimes that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults. The statistics suggest that Internet-initiated sex crimes account for a salient, but small proportion of all statutory rape offenses (7%) and a relatively low number of the sexual offenses committed against minors overall (1%).

Most offenders take time to develop relationships with victims. Investigators describe victims in half of the cases as being in love with or having feelings of close friendship toward offenders. Sixty-four percent communicated online with victims for more than one month prior to meeting the victim; 79% had telephone conversations; 48% sent pictures online to victims; and 47% sent or offered gifts or money.

Nonetheless, romantic and sexual involvements with adults during early and mid-adolescence are associated with a range of negative outcomes that bode ill for youth in terms of mental health and academic achievement. And online sexual predators do target certain vulnerable youth, including boys who are gay or questioning, youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, youth with other troubles such as depression or delinquency, youth with poor relationships with their parents, and youth who visit chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior.

Suggestions for how to address this problem include maintaining the use of undercover decoys posing online as young adolescents and targeting youth for prevention discussions around healthy relationships and online behavior. Moreover, providing safe centers and outlets for at-risk youth – such as proposed by S.981 – could provide at-risk youth a safety net and social support network that steers them away from risky online behavior.

Only 4% of online predators arrested for crimes against youth victims are registered sex offenders. Thus, policies to address this problem that are targeted at registered sex offenders – such as H.2405 – are aimed at a very small part of the problem. Internet safety needs to be designed with the assumption that most online predators are not registered offenders and have no prior record. Thus, other mechanisms for deterring this behavior need to be designed.

Assessing the Impact of Policies on Families

FAMILY IMPACT CHECKLIST

The first step in developing family-friendly policies is to ask the right questions:

- **What can government and community institutions do to enhance the family's capacity to help itself and others?**
- **What effect does (or will) this policy (or program) have for families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family life?**

These questions sound simple, but they can be difficult to answer. These questions are the core of a family impact analysis that assesses the intended and unintended consequences of policies, programs, and organizations on family stability, family relationships, and family responsibilities. Family impact analysis delves broadly and deeply into the ways in which families contribute to problems, how they are affected by problems, and whether families should be involved in solutions. Guidelines for conducting a family impact analysis can be found at www.familyimpactseminars.org/fi_howtocondfia.pdf.

Family impact questions can be used to review legislation and laws for their impact on families; to prepare family-centered questions or testimony for hearings, board meetings, or public forums; and to evaluate programs and operating procedures of agencies and organizations for their sensitivity to families. Six basic principles serve as the criteria of how sensitive to and supportive of families policies and programs are. Each principle is accompanied by a series of family impact questions.

The principles are not rank-ordered and sometimes they conflict with each other, requiring trade-offs. Cost effectiveness also must be considered. Some questions are value-neutral and others incorporate specific values. This tool, however, reflects a broad bi-partisan consensus, and it can be useful to people across the political spectrum.

Principle 1. **FAMILY SUPPORT & RESPONSIBILITIES**

Policies and programs should aim to support and supplement family functioning and provide substitute services only as a last resort.

Does the proposal or program:

- support and supplement parents' and other family members' ability to carry out their responsibilities?
- provide incentives for other persons to take over family functioning when doing so may not be necessary?
- set unrealistic expectations for families to assume financial and/or caregiving responsibilities for dependent, seriously ill, or disabled family members?
- enforce absent parents' obligations to provide financial support for their children?

Principle 2. **FAMILY MEMBERSHIP & STABILITY**

Whenever possible, policies and programs should encourage and reinforce marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, especially when children are involved. Intervention in family membership and living arrangements is usually justified only to protect family members from serious harm or at the request of the family itself.

Does the policy or program:

- provide incentives or disincentives to marry, separate, or divorce?
- provide incentives or disincentives to give birth to, foster, or adopt children?
- strengthen marital commitment or parental obligations?
- use appropriate criteria to justify removal of a child or adult from the family?
- allocate resources to help keep the marriage or family together when this is the appropriate goal?
- recognize that major changes in family relationships such as divorce or adoption are processes that extend over time and require continuing support and attention?

Principle 3. **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT & INTERDEPENDENCE**

Policies and programs must recognize the interdependence of family relationships, the strength and persistence of family ties and obligations, and the wealth of resources that families can mobilize to help their members.

To what extent does the policy or program:

- recognize the reciprocal influence of family needs on individual needs, and the influence of individual needs on family needs?
- recognize the complexity and responsibilities involved in caring for family members with special needs (e.g., physically or mentally disabled, or chronically ill)?
- involve immediate and extended family members in working toward a solution?
- acknowledge the power and persistence of family ties, even when they are problematic or destructive?
- build on informal social support networks (such as community/neighborhood organizations, religious communities) that are essential to families' lives?
- respect family decisions about the division of labor?
- address issues of power inequity in families?
- ensure perspectives of all family members are represented?
- assess and balance the competing needs, rights, and interests of various family members?
- protect the rights and safety of families while respecting parents' rights and family integrity?

Principle 4. **FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & EMPOWERMENT**

Policies and programs must encourage individuals and their close family members to collaborate as partners with program professionals in delivery of services to an individual. In addition, parent and family representatives are an essential resource in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation.

In what specific ways does the policy or program:

- provide full information and a range of choices to families?
- respect family autonomy and allow families to make their own decisions? On what principles is family autonomy breached and program staff allowed to intervene and make decisions?
- encourage professionals to work in collaboration with the families of their clients, patients, or students?
- take into account the family's need to coordinate the multiple services required? Does it integrate well with other programs and services that the families use?
- make services easily accessible to families in terms of location, operating hours, and easy-to-use application and intake forms?
- prevent participating families from being devalued, stigmatized, or subjected to humiliating circumstances?
- involve parents and family representatives in policy and program development, implementation, and evaluation?

Principle 5. **FAMILY DIVERSITY**

Families come in many forms and configurations, and policies and programs must take into account their varying effects on different types of families. Policies and programs must acknowledge and value the diversity of family life and not discriminate against or penalize families solely for reasons of structure, roles, cultural values, or life stage.

How does the policy or program:

- affect various types of families?
- account for its benefits to some family types but not others? Is one family form preferred over another? Does it provide sufficient justification for advantaging some family types and for discriminating against or penalizing others?
- identify and respect the different values, attitudes, and behavior of families from various racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and geographic backgrounds that are relevant to program effectiveness?
- acknowledge intergenerational relationships and responsibilities among family members?

Principle 6. **SUPPORT OF VULNERABLE FAMILIES**

Families in greatest economic and social need, as well as those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should be included in government policies and programs.

Does the policy or program:

- identify and publicly support services for families in the most extreme economic or social need?
- give support to families who are most vulnerable to breakdown and have the fewest resources?
- target efforts and resources toward preventing family problems before they become serious crises or chronic situations?

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How are Youth Doing? Trends in Youth Victimization and Well-Being and Implications for Youth Policy

By Lisa M. Jones, Ph.D., with the assistance of Rashmi Nair and Michelle Collett

Issues connected to youth victimization and well-being have been on the minds of educators, public health officials, and the media for many years. However, the worrisome stories about crimes against children that regularly fill the media have unfortunately obscured some more positive news from statistical reports on these same issues. Child victimizations of various types have been declining since the early 1990s, in some cases declining dramatically. Similar trends have also been noticed in the areas of maladjustment and youth internet victimization.

However, not much focus has gone into showcasing these achievements, which gives a lopsided picture of the reality and keeps us from learning more about what is behind positive trends, information that could help us further improve youth safety and well-being in an informed manner. This report discusses the trends in various forms of child victimization and well-being, the potential reasons for these trends, and the implications of these findings for policy makers.

CHILD MALTREATMENT AND VICTIMIZATION FACTS

Declines in Child Maltreatment and Victimization

- Sexual abuse started to decline in the early 1990s, after at least 15 years of steady increases. From 1990 through 2010, sexual abuse substantiations were down 62% (see Figure 1). [21]
- Physical abuse substantiations joined the downward trend starting in the mid-1990s, in a decline that was most dramatic between 1997 and 2000. From 1990 through 2010, physical abuse substantiations have declined 56% (see Figure 1). [21]
- Sexual assaults of teenagers have dropped, according to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). From 1993 through 2005, overall sexual assaults decreased 52%. The subgroup of sexual assaults by known persons was down even more.
- Other crimes against teens aged 12–17 were also down dramatically as measured by the NCVS. Between 1993 and 2005, aggravated assault was down 69%, simple assault down 59%, robbery down 62%, and larceny down 54%.
- Juvenile victim homicides have declined 60% from 1993 to 2005 [8].
- Domestic violence has also been declining, according to the NCVS [18], down 68% from 1992 to 2004, meaning that fewer children were being exposed to violent parents.

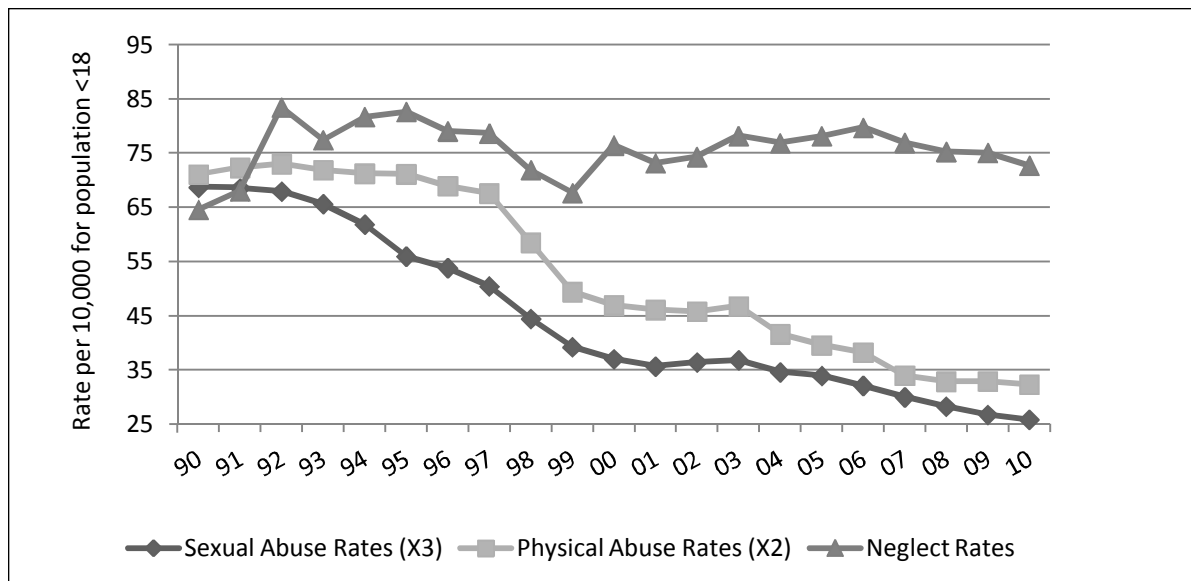


Figure 1: Maltreatment Trends in the U.S. over Time

Exceptions to this Declining Trend

- One exception to the overall declining pattern concerns child neglect. Whereas declines occurred first in sexual and then a few years later in physical abuse, child neglect, one of the other major categories of child maltreatment, has not declined as precipitously. By 2010, substantiated neglect cases were only 10% below the level in 1990 (Figure 1), making neglect one of the few forms of child victimization that did not show a marked decline over the past twenty years. It is possible that greater attention to neglect in recent decades has masked a possible decline in this indicator.
- Another exception to the pattern has been child maltreatment fatalities. While homicide in general and child homicide in particular have declined overall, the level of child maltreatment fatalities has stayed level nationally. However, this is probably due to data system changes; it is likely that the development, implementation, and growing use of Child Fatality Review Boards [5], and other intensive forensic efforts, have identified child maltreatment as a feature of a considerable number of child deaths that might not have been previously identified as such.

Child victimization and maltreatment trends in New England

Even in the midst of continuing difficult economic times, recent data from New England generally mirrors the long term trends in child victimization [21]; long term (1992-2010) trends in the area of sexual abuse showed a decline. Below are child maltreatment trends across different states in New England.ⁱ

- Reports of child sexual abuse dropped by 60% in Connecticut, 61% in Maine, 67% in Massachusetts, 77% in New Hampshire, 76% in Rhode Island and 39% percent in Vermont between 1992 and 2010 [21].
- Similar trends were true of reports of physical abuse. Declines of 85% were noted in Connecticut, 40% in Maine, 49% in Massachusetts, 57% in New Hampshire, 71% in Rhode Island, and 36% in Vermont [21].
- Once again child neglect was found to be an exception. While we saw a decline of 14% in Connecticut and 90% in Vermont, other states showed a rise in the incidents of child neglect. Maine showed an increase by 74%, Massachusetts 29%, New Hampshire 70%, and Rhode Island 22%. [21]
- Child maltreatment fatalities trends remained stable in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Maine showed a decrease in fatalities due to maltreatment by 50% and Vermont showed an increase of 33%. Data from Massachusetts were missing [21].

ⁱRates cannot be compared directly across states because of differences in how they define abuse and how abuse is investigated and processed. Individual state trends can also be affected by changes in definition or procedures.

Similar Trends in Youth Maladjustment

Some have expressed skepticism about the declines in sexual and physical abuse because the data is drawn from child protective service agency administrative files, and thus affected by state-level changes in definition, procedure, and documentation. However, it is important to note that these trends have also been verified in numerous other data sources.

The National Incidence Survey (NIS), a rigorous national survey of youth-serving professionals, found large declines in identified sexual and physical victimization of youth over the last few decades. Declines over the last two decades have also been identified in a regularly administered self-report survey of school children in Minnesota.

Moreover, trend data published by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show similar improvements in multiple indicators of youth safety and well-being over the same time period. For example, data from the CDC show a 16% decline between 1991 and 2007 in teenagers reporting being in a physical fight within the past year, a 31% decline in suicide rates between 1990 and 2005, a 43% decline in the teenage birth rate between 1991 and 2006, and a 16% decline in the percentage of 9th graders who have reported having sexual intercourse.

Other data show a 60% decline between 1995 and 2005 in the percent of students reporting criminal victimization at school in the previous 6 months [4], a 60% decline in teen runaway arrests between 1994 and 2006 [16], a 12% decline in a range of problem behaviors among children between 1989 and 1999 [1], and a 13%, 22%, and 27% decline in drug use for 12th, 10th, and 8th graders, respectively, between 1997 and 2007 [11].

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THESE TRENDS?

There are a number of likely reasons for the improvements in youth safety and well-being. One possible contributing factor could be the economic prosperity in the U.S. during the 1990s. Over those 10 years there was considerable job growth, hourly wages rose, and social and occupational improvements occurred [6]. The percentage of children living in poverty declined, and many people who had been chronically unemployed or underemployed were able to work or work more. The graph of the unemployment rate had a drop that looked very similar in the 1990s to the trends cited above, and criminologists at that time endorsed prosperity as a likely candidate in crime declines [3]. However, given the fact that child maltreatment declines have continued in recent years, even as the U.S. has experienced substantial economic difficulties, it is likely that something more substantial has contributed to the improvements.

Below, we focus on three other explanations that we believe provide the most comprehensive and plausible explanations for the trends documented. These explanations include the increase of police involvement and other social agents in addressing child maltreatment, the impact of the advancement of psychopharmacology and other mental health treatments, and the expansion of laws and bills that connect to issues of child victimization.

Increased Involvement of Police and Other Social Change Agents in Youth Victimization

In analyzing crime declines in particular, one factor that has been suggested is the role of increased policing. Funds were made available in the 1990s through various mechanisms to hire tens of thousands of additional police. Furthermore, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, police increased their involvement in domestic violence and child maltreatment.

The number of child advocacy centers increased throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, involving law enforcement through their participation on multi-disciplinary child abuse investigation teams. Along with increases in the number of police in this area, there were also increases in the number of social workers, child protection workers, and people engaged in various child safety and child abuse prevention activity.

The new police activities in place by the early 1990s included not just community patrols, but also specialized domestic violence units with a mandate to intervene aggressively in violent families [19], specialized sexual assault officers to work in the investigation and prosecution of sexual abuse inside and outside of families [10], and specialized school resource officers trained to reduce the quantity of youth-on-youth victimization.

This diversification of police activity was accompanied by a diversification of prosecutorial activity as well, as district attorneys took on domestic violence, sexual abuse, and in some cases juvenile crime. The mental health profession also increased the number of its professionals who were in social control activities like facilities for delinquent youth and offender treatment programs in prisons and communities [15].

The presence of these new agents of social control could well have curbed child victimization through a number of mechanisms. These agents were increasingly visible, both in media and in the community, and this presence may have deterred many offenders or would-be offenders. Reading about arrests of child molesters in the news, other molesters may have become less confident of getting away with a sexual encounter with a child.

The new agents also undoubtedly had many cautionary encounters with offenders that may have terminated or reduced offending patterns. Some of these new agents worked directly with victims, whereas some provided education and prevention information to school children and parents. This education probably protected children considerably.

Advances in Mental Health Treatment and Psychopharmacology

Mental health treatments for depression, anxiety, and trauma have seen great improvements over the last several decades, and such treatments have become increasingly easy for the public to access. Furthermore, access to psychopharmacological treatments for depression and anxiety expanded right around the time that the child welfare improvements began.

Prozac came to market in 1987, and within 5 years, there were 4.5 million users in the U.S., the fastest acceptance ever for a psychiatric drug [17]. Along with its descendants, Prozac spurred a sea of change in the approach to depression, anxiety, and other related mental health problems. Data show that the percentage of the population being treated for depression in a given year jumped from 0.7% in 1987 to 2.3% in 1997, and by the end of the period, much of that treatment involved psychopharmacology [17, 24].

Advances in mental health treatment and psychopharmacology could have impacted child well-being and maltreatment in several ways. First, by alleviating chronic depression, discouragement, and despair among a large segment of the population, fewer individuals might act out aggressively. Second, if treatments help youth with similar mental health problems, it could result on a national level in less delinquency and less risk-taking, behavior that can put young people in danger of victimization.

Mental health treatments may also help to improve family life and reduce interpersonal stress, leading to more effective parenting, less child maltreatment, and better supervision. Thus, mental health advances may have had broad effects on a variety of crimes, including running away and suicidal behavior, for which at least one study suggests time trend benefits [9].

Changing Norms, Practices, and Laws

Another possible reason for the declining trends could be attributed to opinion leaders drawing attention to these issues. Around the same time that the declines began, the population was becoming more educated about children and the impact of child victimization. It is plausible that this greater awareness resulted in more protective action by families and others who work with children, and that this awareness has changed norms regarding acceptable treatment of children.

Evidence of these changing norms is reflected in the variety of laws that have been enacted across the country in attempts to reduce child maltreatment and victimization. Specifically in Massachusetts, laws have been enacted to protect children against indecent assault and battery, sexual assault, enticing a child under the age of 16, assault and battery for the purpose of coercion, inducing a minor to become a prostitute, deriving support or maintenance from the earnings or proceeds of prostitution committed by a minor, and possession and dissemination of child pornography.

These are only a small portion of the laws passed in recent years in order to address the problems in this area. Aside from these are also many other bills that are currently being considered. Specifically in Massachusetts, there are several bills in the pipeline that attempt to fill the gaps in the current laws (e.g., human trafficking) or address newer concerns that have emerged regarding youth internet safety.

Efforts like these by policy makers, lawyers and other social actors in the formulation of these laws and bills may have been important contributing factors to the declines in youth victimization. Furthermore, publicity of these laws by the media may have led to increased awareness among the public. Such laws and bills help to ensure that child victims have a greater chance for justice and safety.

Why Aren't the Trends for Child Neglect Declining?

There are a number of reasons why neglect trends may have differed so sharply from those of other indicators of child victimization and well-being [12]. One possibility is that neglect has not declined because it has not been the subject of the same level of policy attention and public awareness as sexual and physical abuse. Media attention has arguably focused much more on sexual and physical abuse compared to neglect, thus drawing more of the attention of social agents such as researchers, program developers, and policy makers to these issues, at least in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another possibility is that an underlying decline in neglect has been masked in recent years by an expansion of definitions and identification efforts [12]. There have been recent child welfare mobilizations around intervening in situations where children are exposed to drug abuse or domestic violence in the home, which are often categorized as cases of neglect after investigation. The National Incidence Studies (NIS) found some evidence consistent with this hypothesis [12].

YOUTH INTERNET VICTIMIZATION

The rapid expansion in the use of the internet among youth has recently caused the public and policy-makers to be concerned that new technology is creating opportunities for new areas of youth victimization. Law-makers have begun to seek more information about ways that policy can help.

However, national research data suggest that the problems with youth Internet safety may be less widespread and dire than news reports and anecdotes suggest. Below are findings from a population-based survey [13] that was aimed to understand internet usage among youth in this country. The Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS) were conducted in 2000, 2005, and 2010, providing information across a critical 10-year period (2000–2010) on changes in the rates of three widely cited concerns: online sexual solicitations, unwanted exposure to pornography, and online harassment experiences.

General trends observed in the study are:

- Unwanted sexual solicitations declined from 19% in 2000, to 13% in 2005, and to 9% in 2010, for an overall 50% decline (Figure 2).
- There was a decline in youth reports of unwanted exposure to pornography between the 2005 and 2010 YISS surveys, from 34% to 23%. This decline followed an increase between 2000 and 2005 from 25% to 34% (Figure 2).
- There was a small increase in reports of online harassment, from 9% in 2005 to 11% in 2010. This was found to be a problem especially among girls. This continued an increase seen between 2000 and 2005 (from 6% to 9%) (Figure 2).

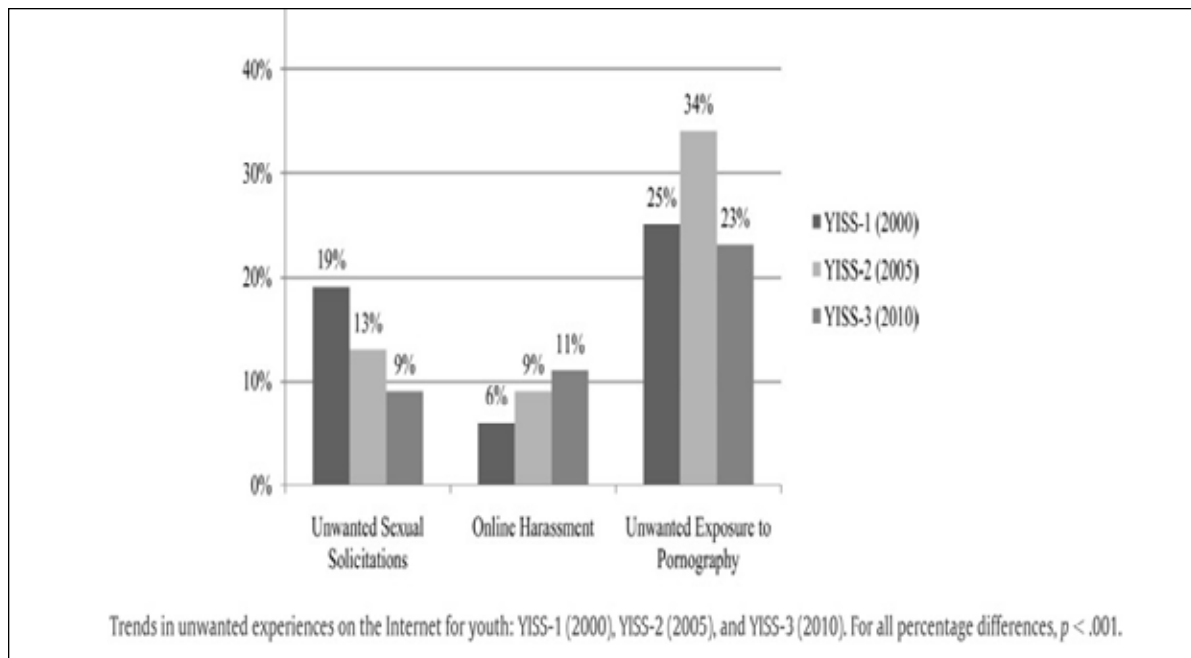


Figure 2: Trends in Youth Internet Victimization

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THESE TRENDS?

Online Sexual Solicitations

The reason for the steady decline in online sexual solicitation rates could be due to several factors. It may be that online behavior has changed in ways that reduce such solicitations. For example, youth have migrated from chat rooms to social networking sites over past several years [14]. In social networking environments, youth may be confining more of their interactions to people they know, thus reducing online unwanted sexual comments or requests.

It is also possible that young people have become more cautious regarding who they interact with because of Internet safety education. A tremendous effort was made during the past decade to warn young people about the dangers of online sexual interactions.

Also, publicity about criminal prosecutions may have deterred some of the aggressive sexual messaging. There have been many prosecutions of adults during the past decade for directing sexual messages to youth. Although research has found that most unwanted sexual messages online come from other youth and not adults, the potential to get into legal trouble from sending such messages may have been impressed on all Internet participants.

Unwanted Exposure to Pornography

The study also found a recent substantial decrease in youth exposure to unwanted pornography. This does not mean that young people who are voluntarily accessing pornography are having a hard time finding it. Rates of intentional viewing of X-rated material among young Internet users range from 13% to 23%, and percentages have remained relatively stable over time [23].

The decline involves unwanted exposures, such as those that occur through errors in searches, unwanted pop-ups, and spam e-mail [23]. The decrease in exposure could be due to two factors. First, spamwares and filters have become increasingly present on networks and individual computers, and their detection capacities have become more refined. Second, young people may have become better educated and more savvy about opening unidentified e-mail or clicking on unidentified links.

Online Harassment

The 2010 YISS findings did show an increase in Internet harassment, from 9% in 2005 to 11% in 2010, continuing an increase from 2000. Online harassment – making aggressive or demeaning statements or spreading rumors online – has become a particular concern to policy makers lately.

The data from the YISS studies suggested that the increase was driven primarily by a rise in indirect harassment – someone posting or sending comments to others about them online. Girls made up an increasing proportion of victims: 69% of victims were girls versus 31% boys in 2010.

It is important to note, however, that the percentage of youth experiencing such harassment is still fairly low, and many of these were one-time incidents that were not particularly bothersome to the targeted youth.

This increase likely can be attributed to how youth are using the internet (for example, more online social interaction with off-line peers), and it is important to keep in mind that the increase occurred over a period of time in which overall bullying has declined, according to several sources. Encouragingly, the YISS data also found that victims were disclosing harassment incidents to school staff at greater rates in 2010 than in 2005 or 2000.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS?

Although the trends discussed in this report are critical for identifying best ways to help improve youth safety and well-being, they have received very little attention. This could be in part because those working closely with youth, and particularly victimized youth, feel worried that good news could lead to reductions in policy attention and funding. However, we think that is an erroneous position. It seems to us that highlighting the successes allows policy makers to move forward with more confidence on these issues, knowing that their efforts and attention have had positive effects.

It is clear from the improvements we have seen that researchers, policy makers and active social agents must continue to invest in the practices that are working. Research data should be used to inform interventions and to evaluate their success. We must redouble efforts to understand better which practices and laws have worked, in which areas they have worked, and why they have worked. This includes identifying ineffective practices, understanding the reasons why they are ineffective, and proposing remedies. Such efforts are crucial to making sure that we do not lose ground on the advances in youth safety we have made so far, increase our successes, and expand our achievements to other areas of youth well-being.

More work should be done to investigate the explanations for the trends and gather confirmatory or disconfirmatory evidence about them. Based on the arguments and evidence we have reviewed, we think the explanations of increasing numbers of agents of social intervention, mental health treatments, and the changing norms, practices, and laws around protecting children are ones that merit particular attention. Furthermore, the search for additional explanations also needs to be encouraged. Those reviewed here are certainly not exhaustive.

Another implication for child protection activists and professionals is that social and technological developments beyond their own narrow sphere of effort may assist them in achieving their goals. Too often professionals working in areas of youth safety, victimization, and health work in silos, with little cross-understanding of developments and advances in related areas. Policy makers can assist by providing opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise.

More attention should also be paid to potentially transformative forces such as technology and its ramifications for further improving drug treatment, behavioral management, genetic screening, contraception, family communications, and parenting education. While child protection professionals may not have expertise in these areas, they may have the ability to promote the dissemination and adapt the uses of technologies to have faster and more pervasive impacts on reducing child victimization. Additionally, the child protection field may need mechanisms to better monitor and integrate information from a wide variety of other fields where social, organizational, and technological change may be occurring.

We also need to consider if there are specific kinds of employment opportunities, tax incentives, transfer payments, housing subsidies, or income streams that have more effect or specific effects on various kinds of child safety and child welfare outcomes [22]. If more of the mechanisms by which prosperity improves child safety can be discovered, then some targeted programs may be able to continue progress, or stave off deterioration, even in economic downturns of the future.

With regard to internet or technology-related incidents of child victimization, our research [13] suggests to us that while this is an area of great attention right now, it is still affecting relatively few youth in highly negative ways, compared to offline victimizations. Online harassment may be an issue that requires some prevention attention, but we recommend incorporating such information into existing evidence-based bullying prevention programs.

Bystander education, which has proven successful in other prevention campaigns [2, 7, 20] should be adapted to include online bystanders so that youth can help intervene effectively when they see problems like Internet harassment occurring. Schools need to have evidence-based policies to discourage all types of bullying problems – online or off-line – that threaten the healthy functioning of youth in school environments.

It is critical that information regarding the declines in child maltreatment and child victimization be disseminated and discussed by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, who need to collaborate to better understand the nature of the trends and define the policy and practice implications. By using the data that is available to us, improving the data, and answering these questions, we can extend or accelerate our successes in helping youth.

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Global and Local Youth Unemployment: Dislocation and Pathways

By Ramon Borges-Mendez, Ph.D., with the assistance of Lillian Denhardt and Michelle Collett

We know that a person's chance of finding employment depends largely on their employment history. This is especially true for youth. National studies have shown that early employment experiences shape youth's earning potential for the rest of their lifetime [1]. Youth unemployment rates, however, have recently reached highs that have not been seen since 1948. Youth unemployment rates for workers ages 16-24 peaked at 19.2% in September of 2009 [2]. Youth are now two times more likely to be unemployed than adult workers, and although youth only comprise 13.5% of the workforce, they represent 26.4% of the unemployed [2]. We know that the recession will not last forever, but today's youth may feel its effects for the rest of their working lives.

This report discusses the current state of youth unemployment so that policy makers can critically consider their options. First, we cover youth's position in the current recession. We then discuss the characteristics of youth who are disproportionately affected by unemployment and the detrimental effects that unemployment can have. Next, we summarize the key recommendations made in the 2009 report by the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board, part of the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Finally, we report on programs and policies that are already in place and provide information on bills currently being debated by the Massachusetts State Legislature.

HOW HAS THIS RECESSION BEEN DIFFERENT THAN OTHERS?

This recession has been especially hard on youth workers. Youth faced a 7.4% increase in unemployment in the first two years of the recession (December 2007 to January 2010) [2]. Figure 1 shows that this substantial increase in unemployment is worse in this recession than it was in any of the three recessions in the past 30 years.

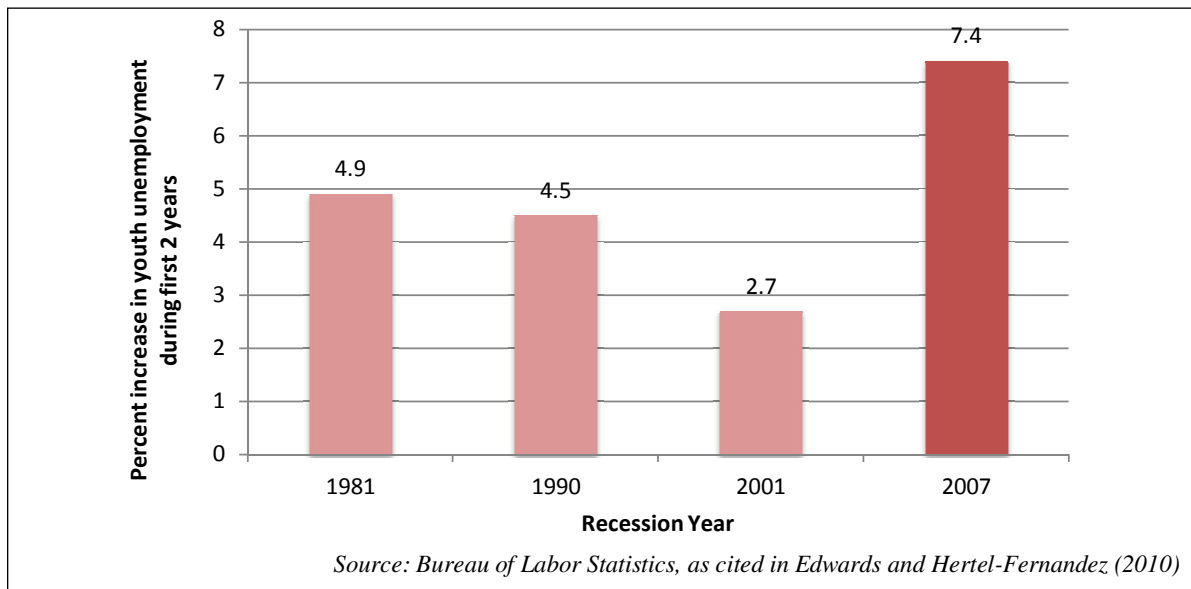


Figure 1: Youth unemployment rates rose more in the first two years of this recession than in any other recession for the past 30 years

In addition to facing harsher employment prospects, many youth are falling out of the labor force entirely. In the two years between December 2007 and January 2010, 1.5 million youth left the labor force. Though adult unemployment also rose during that time, the adult labor force remained relatively stable [2]. Overall, 6.5% of the youth labor force stopped looking for work during this time period.

Some argue that enrollment increases in higher education facilities accounts for many youth who leave the labor force, but that argument does not consider that many students also hold jobs while they study. Ultimately, what this means is that in addition to the vast population of unemployed youth, another 1.5 million youth across the country may be exposed to financial and psychological risks tomorrow because of their non-participation in the labor force today.

WHO IS AFFECTED BY MASS YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT?

Minority Youth

Rising unemployment rates do not affect all youth equally. The recession has exacerbated racial disparities, putting minority youth out of work more often than their white peers [3]. Research has often pointed out disparities between the outcomes for African-American youth versus White youth, but Latino youth also deserve our attention.

This is particularly true in Massachusetts, where Latino residents outnumber African-American residents. As of 2010, almost 10% of Massachusetts' population – or over 600,000 people – identified as Latino [4]. Half of Massachusetts' Latino residents are under the age of 24. In contrast, just under one-third of the state's population is under 24. The median age of a Latino resident is over 12 years younger than that of the general population [4]. These figures tell us that providing pathways for Massachusetts' 300,000 Latino young people to succeed in the work world is more important now than it ever was.

All this would be irrelevant if Latino youth participated in the labor force as often as their White peers. However, they do not. Although their labor force participation rates have been increasing since 1970, Latino youth are still less likely to be in the labor force at any given time than White or African-American youth [5]. This means that they are at a disadvantage when it comes to building skills that will help them increase their lifetime earning potential.

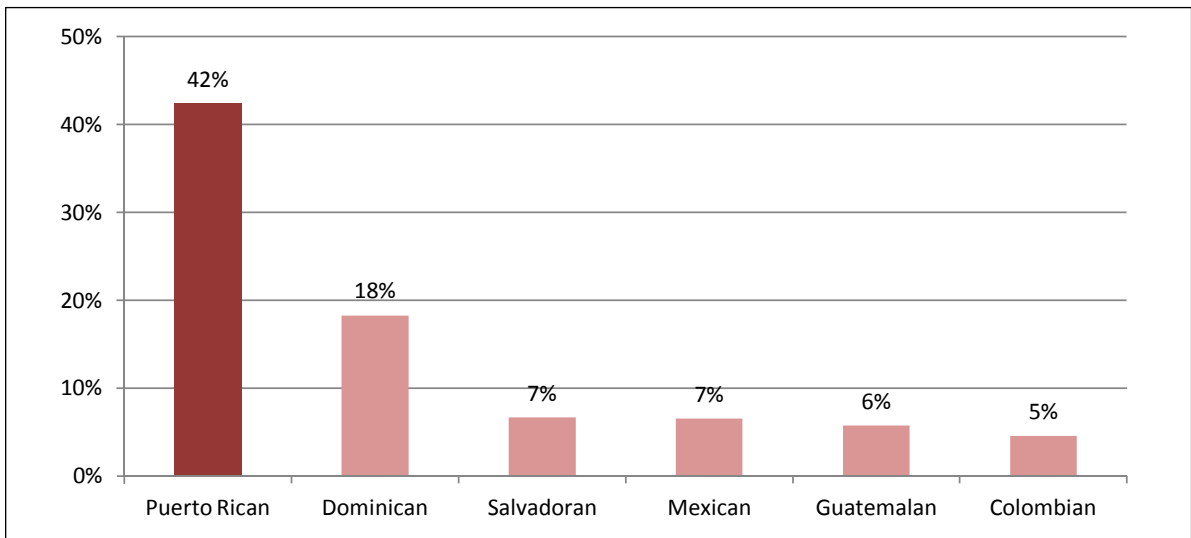


Figure 2: Origins of the Latino Population (MA)
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2010

Youth labor force participation rates also vary by Latino sub-group. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the Latino population in Massachusetts by ethnic group. In 2010, just over 40% of the state's Latino population had Puerto Rican origins. As shown in Figure 3, nationally Puerto Rican youth are the least likely to be in school, be employed, or to be actively looking for work. These youth are therefore especially at risk.

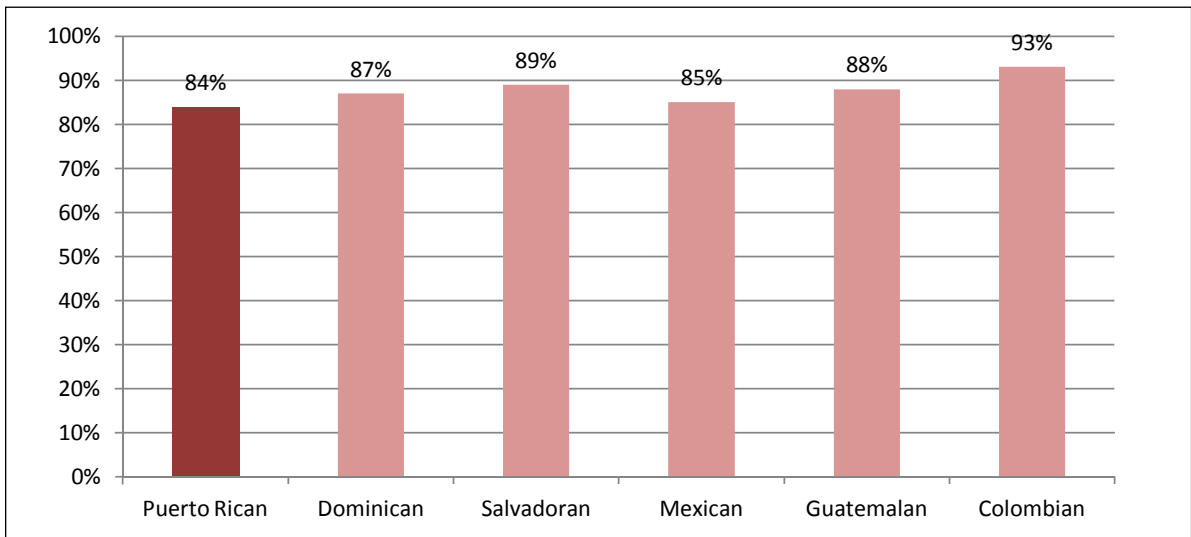


Figure 3: Participation in either the labor force or in school (U.S.)
 Source: Adapted from Fry (2009)

Researchers have found that young Latino women are especially in danger of falling off the pathways to work or school [5]. They are even more at risk than young African-American men, a group that has traditionally experienced significant detachment. Fry states, “Detachment from school and work was particularly pronounced among foreign-born Latino females. More than three-in-ten foreign-born Latino females were neither in school nor the labor force” [5]. Many of these young women are mothers, but even more are not.

Youth involved with the justice system

In 2009, the U.S. had the highest incarceration rate in the world. The growth in the prison population has been most significant amongst young men, especially young men of color [3], and incarceration rates are still on the rise for young African-American men [5]. Other important facts about incarceration include:

- Half of those imprisoned have not finished high school [3];
- One in four African-Americans born in 2009 can expect to go to prison [3];
- Six in ten African-American men without a high school diploma will go to prison [3];
- Half of the prison population is under the age of 35, which means that the impacts of their incarceration will be felt for a large portion of their working lives [3];
- Latino men are twice as likely to be incarcerated as White, non-Latino men [5];
- African-Americans are almost six times more likely to be incarcerated than White men [3].

Many of these young men face employment challenges that can contribute to their criminal behavior. When they get out, their criminal history often complicates their employment prospects even more [5].

Furthermore, three in four minority men in prison are fathers [3], which is especially important when considering youth at risk. The “mass incarceration” of young men of color affects more than just the men who are incarcerated. It also has lasting impacts on those who are left behind.

In one study of two neighborhoods in Tallahassee, the researchers found that every family in both neighborhoods had a loved one who was or had been in prison [3]. Incarceration impacts the communities that those in prison leave behind in a number of ways:

- It weakens the “earning power of people who cycle through the prison system,” making it more difficult to support a family when they return [3];
- “It has reduced the rate of marriage among African Americans,” which introduces the economic disadvantage of growing up in a single-female household [3];
- It puts an “increased economic strain on families” because of the loss of wages and the cost of staying connected to the incarcerated person [3].

Additionally, it damages children’s life chances when a parent goes to prison. In comparison to children whose parents never went to prison, children of parents who have been in prison are 3 to 4 times more likely to have a juvenile delinquency record, which in turn damages their school prospects. In addition, they are 2.5 times more likely to develop a serious mental disorder [3].

Thus, youth can feel the negative impacts of being involved with the justice system even if they themselves have done nothing wrong. These impacts often carry into their working lives, making them more likely to face economic hardship later in life.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOUTH CANNOT FIND WORK?

There is substantial literature to support the argument that periods of unemployment create problems that can be difficult to overcome. Almost no one benefits from being unemployed, but the effects are most lasting for teens and young adults.

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests that unemployment damages self-esteem, increases the likelihood that a person will become depressed, and makes them more susceptible to negative health effects like malnutrition [6]. Unemployment can also reduce a person's life expectancy and increase the likelihood that they will have a heart attack later in life [6]. More alarming still, the same data shows that people who are jobless are more likely to commit suicide [6].

Being unemployed as a young person, especially for a long time, "causes permanent scars rather than temporary blemishes" [6]. While a young person may eventually find a job, having been unemployed raises the probability that they will become unemployed again. Instability like this damages their lifetime earning potential more than it would for an adult who experiences a period of unemployment [6].

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR MASSACHUSETTS?

In 2009, the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board released a report that made three recommendations:

1. Increase the number and quality of work experiences and career exploration activities for both in-school and out-of-school youth.
2. Organize and strengthen collaboration among education, workforce, and human service agencies at both the state and regional levels.
3. Pilot a "multiple pathways" approach in selected regions that combines the education, workforce development, and human service support necessary to address the state's dropout crisis by creating new avenues to educational attainment, economic security, and upward mobility for all youth [1].

The first recommendation addresses the notion that youth who are given the chance to work at a young age will have an easier time finding quality employment later in life. If a teen does not have a job during high school, research has shown that they are more likely to be disconnected from the labor market after high school [2]. Today, fewer young people are being prepared for a life of steady employment.

Evaluations of the Youth Corps program show that young people who participate have better employment prospects when they complete the program and are able to earn more money [7]. Being involved in the program gives young people legitimacy in their applications for future jobs. Additionally, hiring managers see the program as an incentive to hire young workers. The Board writes, "Employers are more likely to participate in a youth program when an adult will vouch for the young person's preparedness for the experience and his/her level of commitment to gaining employment" [1].

The second recommendation aims to address the "lack of alignment between workforce activities and the other systems that serve youth, particularly the education and human service systems" [1]. Other studies have documented the poor alignment of programs, especially to address the needs of low wage workers [9]. The Board found that many good programs are already in place in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, agencies that serve youth find it difficult to weave their services together into a "continuum of care" so that youth do not fall through the cracks.

The final recommendation is meant to provide a safety net before and after youth either leave school or fall behind academically. The Board acknowledges that traditional academic excellence is not the only path to success for youth, but as yet, programs have not adequately allowed for other paths. They charge new policies to increase agencies' capacity to coordinate with each other and innovate new program models "that will address the needs of youth who have fallen behind academically and those who have left school altogether" [1]. The following section outlines programs that are currently in place to address youth unemployment.

PROGRAMS OVERVIEW

Massachusetts

Table 1 provides information from the Commonwealth Corporation summarizing programs in Massachusetts that aim to develop pathways to young adulthood for youth [8].

| Program | MA Dept Liason | Year Established | Program Overview | Who was served? |
|--|---|---------------------|--|--|
| Bridging the Opportunity Gap Initiative | Youth Services (DYS) | 2006 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides employment-related services to DYS youth reentering the community after being involved with the juvenile justice agency • Targets non-court-involved youth • Encourages youth to return to their home communities • Administered by grantee organizations • Trains through 3 pathways <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vocational - Workplace Learning: Certifications, career readiness training, and subsidized employment - Entrepreneurship/Microenterprise: Entrepreneurship training and subsidized employment – ideally in a youth developed or operated small business • Youth placed in subsidized employment upon completion of vocational training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 311 youth in 2010 • Most participants (84%) were male • Program served a higher percentage of Latino/Hispanic youth than the DYS caseload at large • 85% of participants had neither a GED nor a high school diploma • 13% of participants were parents • 19% were English language learners • 31% had an Individual Education Plan • Only 8% of youth were placed in the industry for which they received vocational training • Youth who received a certification reported higher levels of satisfaction with the program and were more likely to find a job after |
| Community Reentry Grant Initiative | Youth Services (DYS) | 2009 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides community oriented activities to DYS clients • Services for education, arts, mentoring, training, and workforce development • Direct services that meet the career readiness, pre-employment and employment needs of youth in the custody of DYS • Direct services that support pre-GED, customized tutoring directed at improving literacy skills, and programming that enables youth to obtain their GED • Programming for a range of out of school time experiences such as mentoring, community service learning, leadership and advocacy training, arts and cultural opportunities • Work-based learning opportunities including internships, entrepreneurship training • Stipends or tuition to support one or more youth within a targeted training program (such as YouthBuild or Job Corp) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth in the custody of DYS |
| Education Quality Assurance Initiative | Youth Services (DYS) | 2008, pilot in 2010 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of the EQA Initiative is to establish, communicate and disseminate a set of core education program standards that define education program quality in DYS residential programs. • Making sure that teachers obtain and maintain certification in at least one subject that they teach over the next five years • Develop Individual Professional Development Plan for teachers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth in DYS residential programs |
| Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEP) | | 2009 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offers 6-7 weeks of employment, about 30 hours per week • Almost always preceded by paid orientation and work readiness training • Many jobs in community service | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put almost 12,000 youth to work in 2009 • Largest program in MA in over 20 years • 7,000 jobs provided by ARRA funds |
| Dropout Reduction and Multiple Pathways Development Virtual Toolshed | Elementary and Secondary Education, Executive Office of Education | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed to collect and share effective tools for practitioners in the field working on improving graduation rates and developing multiple pathways to graduation | |

Table 1 continued on next page

| Program | MA Dept Liason | Year Established | Program Overview | Who was served? |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------|---|--|
| YouthWorks | Office of Labor and Workforce Development | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidizes wages for low-income youth aged 14-21 for summer and year-round jobs • Available to youth living in targeted cities • 25 hours per week • Requires a 20% private sector match | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income-eligible youth • Served 3,745 youth in 29 cities in 2011 • 15% were high-risk (homeless, in foster care, court-involved, on juvenile probation, or gang involved) |
| Transitional Employment Grants | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed to help at-risk youth and the chronically unemployed acquire skills training • Awards grants to organizations to deliver programs designed with the input and participation of employers and businesses • Grantees provided programs in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hospitality - Food services - Maintenance - Media arts and technology - GED attainment - Nurse's Aide training - Building services for men with a felony charge | |

Table 1: Approaches in Massachusetts to Target Youth Unemployment

International approaches

Although each country faces its own unique set of challenges, most countries have had to address the growing ranks of the unemployed brought on by the worldwide economic downturn. Globally, youth are three times as likely to be unemployed as adults [7].

In addition, the International Labor Organization's economic projections predict a longer recovery time for youth unemployment than for the adult labor force. Youth in the most developed nations have been hardest hit. This is in part due to the fact that the years leading up to the current recession saw substantial growth in the developed world.

The bright side of this is that we are not alone. Legislative bodies around the world are working to give youth a better foothold in the labor market. Table 2 briefly summarizes some anti-recession approaches that other developed nations have taken to target youth unemployment.

| Approach | Country |
|--|-------------------------|
| Preferential treatment for government contracts if a firm employs apprentices | Australia |
| Successful public contractors are required to employ a certain proportion of apprentices | United Kingdom |
| Bonuses for firms who hire apprentices | France, Switzerland |
| Bonuses for firms when their apprentices successfully complete their program | Australia, Canada |
| Funds allocated to support high-tech graduate internships | Canada |
| Funds allocated to provide assistance to youth seeking summer jobs | Canada |
| Wage subsidies offered to employers who hire interns on a contract-basis when they complete their internships | Republic of South Korea |
| Wage subsidies to employers who hire 16-24 year olds with 'limited skills;' Subsidy is paid in two installments: NZ\$3000 up front and NZ\$2000 after six months | New Zealand |

Table 2: International Approaches to Youth Unemployment in the Current Recession

Source: *International Labour Institute (2010)*

POLICY OVERVIEW

There are many bills currently being considered in Massachusetts that focus on improving youth employment opportunities. These bills focus on increasing the education of youth and assisting those who are at risk of not completing high school. By raising the education level of youth, they have the opportunity to advance in the workforce.

The Youth Solutions Act of 2011, H.540, was created to promote and support programs in Massachusetts that will increase the education, skills and employment of youth. By supporting agency programs that benefit youth education, the government is able to assist teens entering the labor market while boosting the economy.

H.2712 (2011) proposes a task force that would recommend policies benefitting at risk groups, including youth between the ages of 16 and 21 who are at risk of dropping out of school or who are academically at risk of not completing requirements for high school graduation.

H.2871 (2011) was written with the intention of providing low-income, disadvantaged youth with high impact programs that offer educational and job skills that promote long-term economic success.

S.971 (2011) was created after Section 1. Chapter 25A of the General Laws was amended to further enhance training and career opportunities for young workers. All of these bills aim to focus on areas that the research deems as necessary foci to address this problem of youth unemployment.

Bills currently being debated in neighboring states focus on training high school students and graduates in job skills, and could also be considered for adoption by Massachusetts in its efforts to combat youth unemployment.

For example, there are programs in New York established to help youth find employment opportunities. New York's A01733 would create a youth employment and career development program in New York City high schools. It would be administered by the New York City Board of Education to encourage the development of part- and full-time jobs for high school students and graduates; to provide students with job training, placement services and career counseling; and to assist high school faculty in developing and implementing a curriculum to provide students with work-competency training.

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Online Predators—Myth versus Reality

By Janis Wolak, J.D., with the assistance of Lindsey Evans, Stephanie Nguyen, and Denise A. Hines, Ph.D.

Media stories about “online predators” who use the Internet to gain access to young victims have become a staple of news reports since the late 1990s. Much of the publicity about these cases depicts online molesters who use the Internet to lure children into sexual assaults [5]. In the stereotypical media portrayal, these online child molesters lurk in Internet venues popular with children and adolescents [13]. They use information publicly divulged in online profiles and social networking sites to identify potential targets [21]. They contact victims, using deception to cover up their ages and sexual intentions [6]. Then they entice unknowing victims into meetings or stalk and abduct them [10]. Some news reports have suggested that law enforcement is facing an epidemic of these sex crimes perpetrated through a new medium by a new type of criminal [10]. Needless to say, these reports have raised fears about Internet use by children and adolescents and about the safety of specific online activities such as interacting online with unknown people, posting profiles containing pictures and personal information, and maintaining Web pages at social networking sites.

The reality about Internet-initiated sex crimes—those in which sex offenders meet juvenile victims online—is different, complex, and serious, but less archetypically frightening than the publicity about these crimes suggests. The purpose of this report is to provide an accurate, research-based description of this high-profile social problem and make recommendations for effective responses. We present an overview of research relating to Internet-initiated sex crimes, much of it conducted by the first author and her colleagues at the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. We focus primarily on the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study. The N-JOV Study collected information from a national sample of law enforcement agencies about the prevalence of arrests for and characteristics of online sex crimes against minors during two 12 month periods: July 1, 2000 through June 30, 2001 (Wave 1) and calendar year 2006 (Wave 2).

Overall, our research [35-39] about Internet-initiated sex crimes indicates that the stereotype of the Internet “predator” is largely inaccurate. Most Internet-initiated sex crimes involve adult men who use the Internet to meet and seduce young adolescents into sexual encounters. Most such offenders are charged with crimes, such as statutory rape, that involve nonforcible sexual activity with victims who are too young to consent to sexual intercourse with adults. The statistics suggest that Internet-initiated sex crimes account for a salient, but small proportion of all statutory rape offenses and a relatively low number of the sexual offenses committed against minors overall. Specifically, crime report data suggest that 25% of the sex crimes committed against minors and reported to police involve statutory rape [33]. Online relationships accounted for about 7% of arrests for statutory rape in 2000, and arrests of online predators in 2006 constituted about 1% of all arrests for sex crimes committed against children and youth [38].

PROFILES OF A RELATIONSHIP INITIATED BY AN ONLINE SEXUAL PREDATOR

Online child molesters use online communications to establish trust and confidence in their victims, who typically are adolescents, by introducing talk of sex, and then arranging to meet youth in person for sexual encounters [38]. In 89% of cases with face-to-face meetings, offenders had sexual intercourse, oral sex, or another form of penetrative sex with victims. Only 5% of meetings involved violent offenses, mostly rape or attempted rape, while 16% involved coercion (i.e., victim was pressured into having sex or doing sexual things that they did not want to do), not all of which happened during the first meeting [38].

Some victims (40%) who attended face-to-face meetings were given illegal drugs or alcohol, exposed to adult or child pornography (23% and 15%, respectively), or photographed in sexual poses (21%). A few cases (3%) involved brief abductions that happened in the course of sexual assaults, and 29% of victims who attended face-to-face meetings with offenders were reported missing to police. Investigators described 24% of victims involved in face-to-face meetings as runaways. Another 5% who were reported missing had lied about their whereabouts to their parents, often claiming to be spending a night or a weekend with a friend [38].

Most offenders took time to develop relationships with victims. Investigators described victims in half of the cases as being in love with or having feelings of close friendship toward offenders. Sixty-four percent communicated online with victims for more than one month prior to meeting the victim; 79% had telephone conversations; 48% sent pictures online to victims; and 47% sent or offered gifts or money. Gifts ranged from small tokens like jewelry and teddy bears to items like clothing, cell phones, and digital cameras [38].

Because some youth victims feel love and allegiance toward offenders, they may also feel victimized by authorities and parents and may blame them for any stigma or embarrassment they experience. They may also not wish to cooperate with law enforcement or mental health providers [37].

Nonetheless, romantic and sexual involvements with adults during early and mid-adolescence are associated with a range of negative outcomes [14, 24] and may result in neglect of other important developmental tasks, such as academic performance [40]. Research has linked high teen pregnancy rates to youth who have sex with older partners [7, 8]. Young adolescents with older partners also have high rates of coerced intercourse [19]. Finally, early sexual activity itself is related to a variety of risk behaviors, from unprotected sex with multiple partners to substance abuse and delinquency [27, 40]. These bode ill for youth in terms of mental health and academic achievement [40].

Furthermore, the trauma of some may be compounded by an awareness that sexual pictures of themselves may be circulating online, if they complied with perpetrators’ requests to send or have provocative pictures taken of them [36].

In the next section, we outline two case examples that provide a window into the profiles of these types of relationships initiated by online sexual predators.

CRIMES BY ONLINE PREDATORS: CASE EXAMPLES

Case #1. Police in a West Coast state found child pornography in the possession of the 22-year-old offender. The offender, who was from a Northeastern state, confessed to befriending a 13-year-old local boy online, travelling to the West Coast, and meeting him for sex. Prior to the meeting, the offender and victim had corresponded online for about six months. The offender had sent the victim nude images via webcam and e-mail and they had called and texted each other hundreds of times. When they met for sex, the offender took graphic pictures of the encounter. The victim believed he was in love with the offender. He lived alone with his father and was struggling to fit in and come to terms with being gay. The offender possessed large quantities of child pornography that he had downloaded from the Internet. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison [38].

Case #2. A 24-year-old man met a 14-year-old girl at a social networking site. He claimed to be 19. Their online conversation became romantic and sexual, and the victim believed she was in love. They met several times for sex over a period of weeks. The offender took nude pictures of the victim and gave her alcohol and drugs. Her mother and stepfather found out and reported the crime to the police. The victim was lonely, had issues with drugs and alcohol, and problems at school and with her parents. She had posted provocative pictures of herself on her social networking site. She had met other men online and had sex with them. The offender was a suspect in another online enticement case. He was found guilty but had not been sentenced at time of the interview [38].

ARE INTERNET-INITIATED SEX CRIMES INCREASING?

Figure 1 presents information on the change over time in online predator arrests between our two survey years of 2000 and 2006.

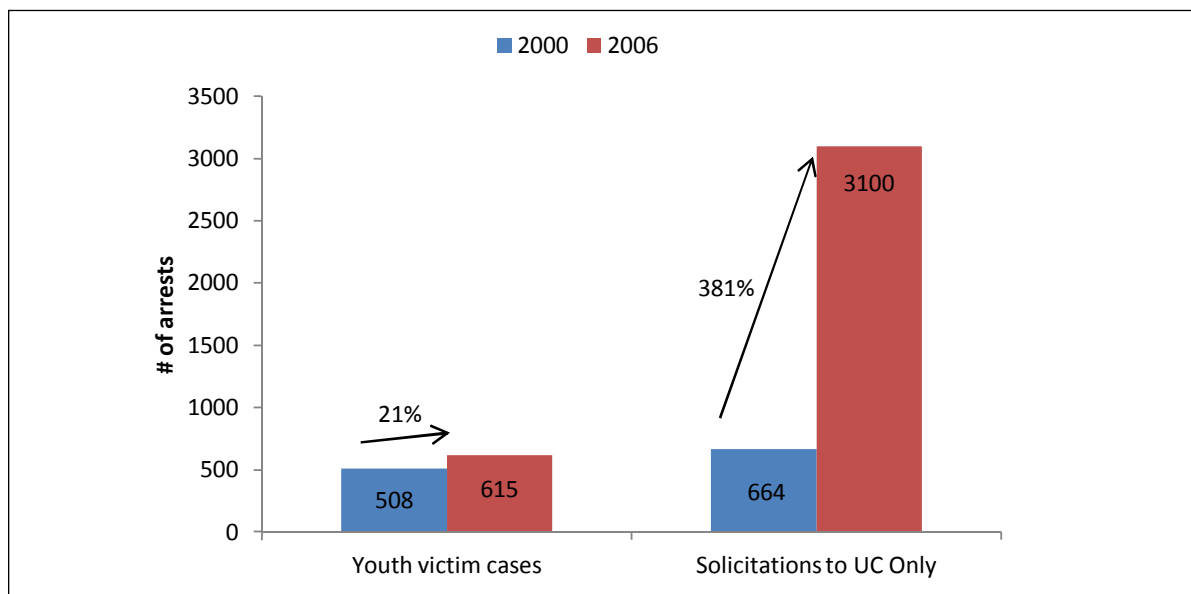


Figure 1: Online predator arrests from 2000 to 2006

As shown, arrests for Internet-initiated sex crimes against children increased 21% in that time period [38]. However, it is important to note that between 2000 and 2006, the percentage of U.S. youth Internet users ages 12-17 also increased from 73% to 93% [17, 18]. Moreover, between 2000 and 2006, there was a 381% increase in arrests of offenders who solicited undercover investigators posing as youth; in fact, in 2006, of those arrested for soliciting online, 87% solicited undercover investigators and 13% solicited youth [38].

Thus, although arrests of online predators are increasing, the facts do not suggest that the Internet is facilitating an epidemic of sex crimes against youth. Rather, increasing arrests for online predation probably reflect increasing rates of youth Internet use, a migration of crime from offline to online venues, and the growth of law enforcement activity against online crimes. In addition, the nature of crimes in which sex offenders used the Internet to meet and victimize youth changed little between 2000 and 2006 [38], despite the advent of social networking sites, as shown by Figure 2.

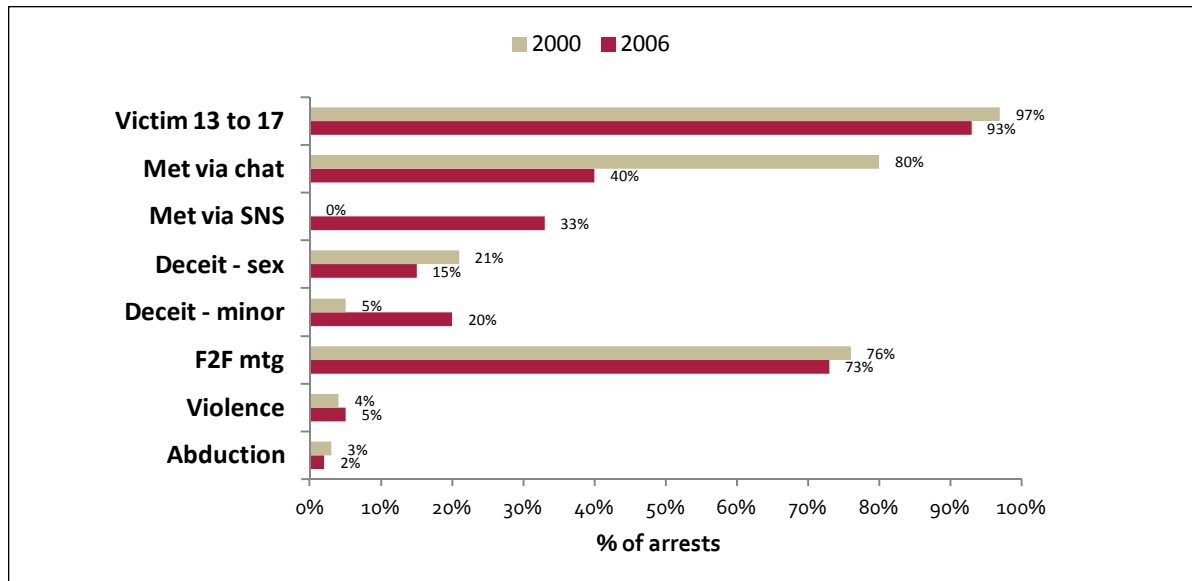


Figure 2: Characteristics of crimes committed by online predators, 2000 to 2006

WHO IS AT RISK FOR VICTIMIZATION?

Almost all victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes were 13 to 17 years old. About half were 13 or 14 years old [36]. This age profile is different from conventional offline child molestation which includes a large proportion of victims younger than age 12 [11, 29].

Although online molesters take advantage of developmentally normal adolescent interests in romance and sex, some youth characteristics and online activities increase the likelihood that youth will receive online sexual solicitations, which in some cases lead to sexual victimization. These characteristics and online activities include boys who are gay or questioning their sexual orientations; youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, or other troubled youth; youth with poor relationships with their parents; and youth who frequent chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior [36].

Boys who are gay or questioning. When boys are victims of Internet-initiated sex crimes, virtually all of their offenders are male [36]. Hostility and social stigma toward homosexuality [32, 34], as well as feelings of isolation and loneliness [20, 30], may impair the ability of boys who identify as gay or questioning to form age-appropriate intimate relationships. Concerns about confidentiality can also limit these boys’ willingness to get information about sexual matters from trusted adults [9]. For these reasons, some gay boys turn to the Internet to find answers to questions about sexuality or meet potential romantic partners, and there they may encounter adults who exploit them.

Youth with histories of sexual or physical abuse, and other troubled youth. Abused youth are more at risk for sexual victimization and exploitation in a variety of ways [12, 27]. Abuse history could make some youth less able to assess inappropriate sexual advances [4, 28]. Some may be vulnerable to online sexual

advances because they are looking for attention and affection [16]. For some, prior abuse may trigger risky sexual behavior that directly invites online sexual advances. Moreover, delinquency, depression, and social interaction problems unrelated to abuse also may increase vulnerability. Adolescents of both sexes who are troubled with depression and related problems are more likely than other youth to form close online relationships with people they meet online [35].

Youth with poor relationships with parents. Adolescent girls who report a high degree of conflict with their parents and boys who report low parental monitoring are more likely than other youth to form close online relationships with people they meet online [35].

Youth who visit chatrooms, talk online to unknown people about sex, or engage in patterns of risky off- or online behavior. There is overlap between youth who visit chatrooms and the previously mentioned risk factors, in that adolescents who visit chatrooms are more likely to have problems with their parents; to suffer from sadness, loneliness, or depression; to have histories of sexual abuse; and to engage in risky behavior than those who do not visit chatrooms [3, 31]. Youth who are lonely, shy, or lacking in social skills may interact with others in chatrooms to compensate for problems they have forming friendships offline [26]. Thus, it is not surprising that visiting chatrooms is a risk factor for online sexual solicitations. In fact, about one third of youth who received online sexual solicitations in 2006 had received them in chatrooms [41].

Other online behaviors also increase risk for online sexual solicitations. Youth who send personal information (e.g., name, telephone number, pictures) to unknown people or talk online to such people about sex are more likely to receive aggressive sexual solicitations—i.e., those that involve actual or attempted offline contact [23]. Overall, as the number of different online risk behaviors increases (see Table 1), so do the odds of online victimization [42]. Specifically, youth who engage in three or four different types of these online behaviors are 5 and 11 times more likely to report online sexual solicitation or harassment, respectively, than those who do not.

| Online Risk Factor | % of Youth Engaging in it |
|---|---------------------------|
| Posting personal information online | 56% |
| Interacting online with unknown people | 43% |
| Having unknown people on a buddy list | 35% |
| Using the Internet to make rude and nasty comments to others | 28% |
| Sending personal information to unknown people met online | 26% |
| Downloading images from file-sharing programs | 15% |
| Visiting X-rated sites on purpose | 13% |
| Using the Internet to embarrass or harass people youth are mad at | 9% |
| Talking online to unknown people about sex | 5% |

Table 1: Online Risk Factors and the Percentage of Youth Who Engage in them

Source: Ybarra et al., 2007

Of youth Internet users ages 10 to 17, 15% were high-risk interactors who communicated online with unknown people and engaged in at least four of the other behaviors on the above list [37].

WHO ARE THE OFFENDERS?

Although there is little research about the characteristics of online sexual predators, they appear to occupy a restricted range on the spectrum of the sex offender population and include few true pedophiles or violent or sadistic offenders [36]. Figure 3 presents the demographic and other histories of the men arrested in both our 2000 and 2006 surveys [38].

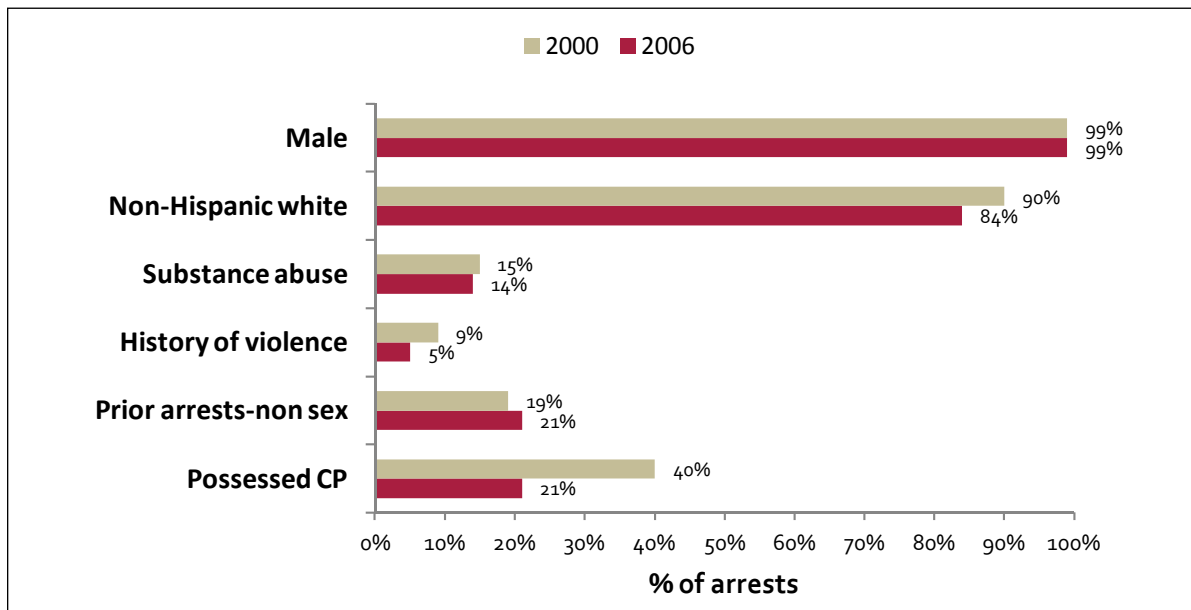


Figure 3: The characteristics of online predators, 2000 to 2006

Because online child molesters primarily target adolescents, not young children [38], such offenders do not fit the clinical profile of pedophiles, who are, by definition, sexually attracted to prepubescent children [1].

Nunez suggested several possible motivations among adults who pursue sex with adolescents [25], which could apply to online molesters. They may seek admiration from victims who are sexually responsive but naive, want to relive adolescent experiences, be inhibited by fear of adult partners, or desire the power and control they can exert over youth. Adult men who seek adolescent girls in offline environments are more likely to have criminal histories, less education, feelings of inadequacy, and arrested psychosocial development [15]. These offline offenders may be different from online child molesters, however. Some online child molesters may be primarily sexually attracted to adults but target adolescents for reasons that include impulse, curiosity, anger, or desire for power [16].

Offenders caught by stings

One in eight offenders arrested in undercover operations had committed crimes against actual youth victims, which were discovered as a result of the undercover operation. Those who solicited undercover investigators were somewhat older and more middle class compared with those who solicited actual youth. They were also somewhat less likely to have prior arrests for sexual offenses against minors or for nonsexual offenses, or to have histories of violence or deviant sexual behavior. However, both groups had equally high rates of child pornography possession (about 40%) and rates of substance abuse (about 15%) [38].

WHAT IS BEING AND CAN BE DONE

Over the six years between the two studies, we saw considerable law enforcement mobilization in response to online predators; there has been a marked increase in arrests of those who would try to use the Internet to recruit minors for sexual activity.

Most of these arrests have occurred through the use of undercover decoys posing online as young adolescents. Our earlier evaluation of this law enforcement activity suggested that overall this was being carried out responsibly by specially trained officers in multiagency operations, and that it had resulted in conviction rates as high as or higher than other sex crime investigations [22]. Given the overall declines in sex crimes against minors and in the absence of evidence that police authority is being abused, we are inclined to see this as a sign of a successful initiative to deploy law enforcement in a domain where criminal sexual activities may be migrating, as well as the successful adaptation of new technology to improve police effectiveness.

Prevention should also be targeted to the general audience of adolescents [2]. Because one quarter of the victims were 13-year-olds, these prevention discussions need to start in earliest adolescence [36]. One avenue is to educate teenagers directly about why such relationships are a bad idea. Young teens may not be fully aware that the adults in these relationships are committing crimes and can go to jail. They have probably not considered the publicity, embarrassment, and life disruption likely to accompany a public revelation of such a relationship. They may benefit from understanding the manipulations that adult offenders engage in, and from understanding that adults who care about their well-being would not propose sexual relationships or involve them in risky encounters. They should be informed of why such romances end quickly, even when not discovered, and how frequently the offenders have other partners. They should know that corresponding with adults trolling for teenage partners can encourage offenders and endanger other youth, even when relationships are confined to the Internet. They need to be told bluntly that any sexual pictures they pose for may end up on the Internet or as evidence in a courtroom [36].

WHAT IS BEING AND CAN BE DONE IN MASSACHUSETTS

Most of these relationships fall under statutory rape laws. Massachusetts has set guidelines as to what is considered statutory rape and appropriate punishment based on the age of both parties involved and whether the adult is a repeat offender (Part 5, Title 1, Chapter 265, Section 23). Massachusetts has also enacted laws to protect minors from violent or obvious threats to safety that take place either on- or off-line including protection from sex offenders, forced or unsolicited sex, and criminal harassment. Finally, there are laws tailored to online or media interactions that protect victims against criminal harassment if that harassment causes significant distress. Thus, Massachusetts is clearly focused on protecting children from sex offenders and threats that exist both on- and off-line.

There are some bills currently in the legislature that relate to this issue of online predators, which includes H.2405 (2011): An Act creating a task force to study the use of the internet by sex offenders. This bill proposes to create a task force to report on electronic communications and the feasibility of tracking sex offender internet use, via methods including but not limited to: (1) internet protocol addresses, (2) media access control addresses, (3) internet service providers, (4) electronic mail, and (5) instant messaging. The task force's study shall address, but not be limited to, the following areas: (1) current laws and regulations; (2) other states laws, regulations, and efforts; (3) the feasibility of registration of sex offenders' online addresses; and (4) relevant civil liberties issues.

Related to this bill, our 2006 study found that only 4% of online predators arrested for crimes against youth victims were registered sex offenders, as were 2% of those arrested for soliciting undercover investigators [38]. Thus, policies targeted at registered sex offenders are aimed at a very small part of the problem. *Internet safety needs to be designed with the assumption that most online predators are not registered offenders and have no prior record.* Thus, other mechanisms for deterring this behavior need to be designed.

Victims are most often at-risk youth who have previously been abused or already have problems in school or at home. The connection between at-risk youth and online activity has yet to be recognized in legislation. S.981 proposes the opening of five teen drop-in centers, where teens can go to seek free and confidential mental health services and access to information and support groups for whatever it is they are going through. This bill is geared toward giving youth a safe place to seek information about mental health or other issues and does not directly address the issue of at-risk youth and online predators, but it can provide at-risk youth a safety net and social support network that steers them away from risky online behavior.

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