

## ***Internet Sexual Offenders***

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With introduction of the Internet in late 1990's and later the introduction of high speed Internet in early 2000's, we have seen an exponential increase in Internet related sexual offenses. Many questions have been raised since that time, and slowly we are beginning to answer some of those questions. What constitutes an Internet sex offense? Is it a felony or a misdemeanor? What is the recidivism rate for those who commit Internet offenses? If someone commits an Internet offense, will they escalate in their offending and sexually molest a child? What is the best treatment for someone who has committed an Internet offense? What level of supervision should they receive?

In the United States, adults arrested and convicted for Internet related sexual offenses, typically fall under federal jurisdiction. Offenders receive felony convictions for possession, distribution, receipt or production of child pornography, or use of Interstate commerce to induce a minor to engage in illegal sexual activity (online solicitation of a minor). More recently local jurisdictions have been conducting their own investigations, and depending on the circumstances, the local jurisdiction may handle the matter of possession of child pornography locally or they may choose to hand the case over to federal investigators. In California, whether convicted through the federal judicial system or the local judicial system, Internet sex offenders are subsumed under the current sex offender registration laws (Megan's Law Website).

The U.S. Department of Justice (2010) executive summary indicated the U.S. Attorney's office handled 86% more child pornography cases in 2006, when compared to 1994, and 230% more documented complaints for online enticement of children between 2004 and 2002 and 2005. They found that individuals that possessed or distributed child pornography, when compared with individuals with a contact offense (those that have sexually touched a child), were more likely to be Caucasian, were approximately 10 years older than contact offenders when arrested, and were less likely to have a history of substance use or sexual abuse. They had higher education levels, were more likely to have been married and employed at the time of arrest, and were less likely to have a prior arrest or conviction.

According to Meridian et al. (2016), Internet offenders, like all offenders who commit a sexual offense, are heterogeneous. Some of the individuals using the Internet use it as an extension of their contact sex offending behavior. It is just another venue for them to use to attract or lure victims. Others, believe their time on the Internet is just a fantasy, and they have no intention of following through with their fantasy. They do not believe that their behavior online is harmful, and they feel they have anonymity.

Currently there are two main Internet related offenses that are reviewed in the literature; solicitation of a minor online and possession of child pornography (Seto, 2011). These two offenses, do not represent the totality of Internet sexual offenses. The U.S. Department of Justice (2010) also looked at commercial sexual exploitation of children, and child sex tourism, which are also important areas for exploration. These two crimes use the Internet to promote human trafficking, which is not discussed in this article.

Individuals who engage in online solicitation of a minor, are thought to share characteristics with contact offenders (Seto, 2011). Because they have an identifiable victim (even if it was an undercover agent), they believed they were grooming or intending to meet a minor. They can therefore be scored on sex offender risk instruments, including the Static-99R and Stable-2007. The Static-99R is an actuarial risk instrument for sex offenders, that “is intended to position offenders in terms of their relative degree of risk for sexual recidivism” (Phenix, et al, 2016, p. 6). The STABLE-2007 is a measure of dynamic risk factors, or factors that can change over time, and can aid in identifying treatment needs and targets of supervision (Fernandez, Harris, Hanson, & Sparks, 2014).

According to Seto (2011), individuals who download and view child pornography can be motivated by several different factors. Some are fixated Pedophiles, whose primary sexual interest is children. Some are individuals who have been viewing not only child sexual exploitation images, but have been compulsively viewing online pornography and have been seeking novel and exciting pornography; their primary sexual interest is adults. They appear to be aroused to minors, while viewing the sexual acts of minors. Some are more interested in the collection aspect and not the sexual interest in minors. Some download or possess sexual exploitation images of minors for other purposes. They use the images to troll, or to post the images of a site or user group for the reaction it causes, or they obtain the materials to enhance their online sexual chats, which are fantasy based.

An understanding of how the online world works is imperative when working with this population. Peer-to-peer shareware, one of the main routes to obtain child sexual exploitation images, allows users to download batches of videos and images at one time. Some sites allow for the download of megabytes of files at one time (that means a lot of files and videos can be downloaded at once). File names are not always accurate or descriptive in nature. Therefore, someone could download a number of files they are not interested in; they may have even opened the files and viewed them to determine if it was they are seeking. Assumptions about the men who view child sexual exploitation materials online having Pedophilic Disorder is also being questioned, by many of the clinicians who work with these individuals. More research is needed to determine the long-term impacts of viewing child sexual exploitation materials on arousal.

When it comes to treatment of offenders who viewed or possessed child sexual exploitation materials, it is important to address the underlying issues that may have led to the overuse of Internet pornography (Seto, 2011) (e.g., sexualized coping, poor relationship skills, lack of adult relationships), while addressing the desistance of the hypersexual behavior. Additionally, exploring victim impact would appear to be a promising approach for child pornography possession offenders, as they appear to have the capacity for empathy, and many of the offenders discuss the suspension of reality, and depersonalization of the victim, when viewing child pornography. Further research is needed.

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