

Self-Reported Contact Sexual Offenses by Participants in the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Sex Offender Treatment Program: Implications for Internet Sex Offenders

Andres E. Hernandez, Psy.D.
Director, Sex Offender Treatment Program
Federal Bureau of Prisons
FCI Butner
P.O. Box 1000
Butner, NC 27509
aehernandez@bop.gov

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Introduction

With the explosion of the Internet as a medium of communication and commerce, there has been an increasing number of individuals using cyberspace to commit sexual crimes in recent years. These crimes include downloading, trading, and distributing child pornography, as well as luring children via the Internet for the purpose of sexual abuse and exploitation. Until recently, the Internet has been largely unregulated and unmonitored by law enforcement. This has enabled many individuals to access cyberspace for various illicit purposes with perceived anonymity.

Child pornography, relatively unavailable to many individuals until recently, is now readily available through the Internet. Individuals accessing child pornography typically do so through electronic communications in chat rooms and bulletin boards. They collect and trade child pornography with other individuals with similar interests. They may amass collections of several thousand images depicting children in sexually explicit poses or in the act of being sexually abused by adults. These offenders target children in cyberspace in a similar manner as offenders who prey on children in their neighborhood or nearby park. They seek vulnerable children, gradually groom them, and eventually contact them to perpetrate sexual abuse.

As more Internet sex offenders are adjudicated in federal courts, arguments are raised by prosecutors, defense attorneys, law enforcement personnel, and mental health professionals about the nature of this criminal activity, the typology of this offender population, and the risk posed to the community. In the prosecution of these offenders, some attorneys have argued that the Internet, with its apparent anonymity and easy access to sexually explicit materials (including child pornography), is the culprit of the aforementioned criminal activity. They have argued that

without the availability of child pornography on the Internet, these individuals would not engage in criminal behavior. They blame those who produce child pornography and then distribute the materials via the Internet for their clients' criminal behavior. Others have argued that the Internet has simply given many of these individuals (i.e., child pornographers) more access to already existing or established patterns of behavior and sexual interest (e.g., pedophilia). They suggest that the Internet has merely given those with pedophilic interest and behavior access to a medium of communication that facilitates sexual predation, but does not cause it. Still, others have suggested that child pornographers are not sex offenders at all, and that downloading an image containing child pornography does not make a person a sex offender or a pedophile.

While these arguments require considerable more debate, they also should be subject to empirical analysis. The following study attempts to understand this largely misunderstood criminal population by presenting data obtained in the course of treatment of inmates who volunteered to participate in the Sex Offender Treatment Program at the Federal Correctional Institution in Butner, NC. The primary objective of this exploratory study was to examine the incidence of sexual offending involving contact crimes (e.g., child sexual abuse, rape) of program participants, including those inmates convicted of non-contact sexual offenses (e.g., possession of child pornography).

Method

Overview of the treatment program

The Sex Offender Treatment Program (SOTP) was established in 1990 at the Federal Correctional Institution in Butner, North Carolina. It is an intensive, residential therapeutic program for male sexual offenders in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The program is voluntary; participants do not receive special privileges and are not eligible for a sentence reduction. The program is housed within the general population of a medium security correctional institution. It employs a wide range of cognitive-behavioral and relapse prevention techniques to treat and manage sexual offenders. This prison-based program is probably the only treatment program for sex offenders in which the majority of the participants are Internet sex offenders.

Data Collection

The data in the present study were obtained from a review of the clinical charts of former participants of the SOTP. The raters in this study were comprised of SOTP staff members and pre-doctoral psychology interns.

There were two variables examined in this study. The first was the number of contact sexual crimes the subject was known to have committed prior to entering treatment. This information was extracted from the Presentence Investigation (PSI) Report, a formal court document prepared by the United States Probation Office. The criteria for scoring a contact sexual crime on the PSI were prior convictions or arrests for, and/or self-reported offenses involving any type of sexual assault or molestation of an adult or child. The second variable was the number of self-reported contact sexual crimes divulged over the course of evaluation and treatment in the SOTP. This information was extracted from the subject's discharge report. This document summarizes the offender's self-reported sexual history and list of victims. To appease subjects' concerns

regarding self-incrimination in divulging unreported or undetected sexual crimes during the course of treatment, they had the option of referring to their victims by first name or with a number (e.g., victim 1).

Subjects

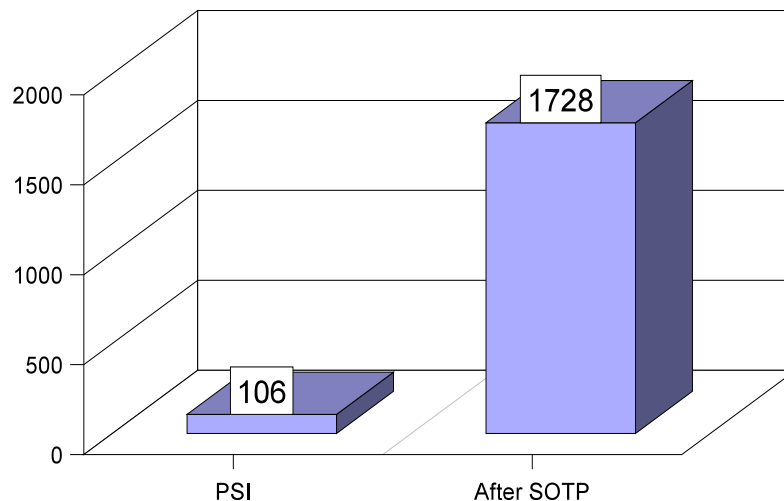
The subjects were 90 incarcerated males, ranging from 23 to 66 years of age, who volunteered to participate in the Federal Bureau of Prisons' SOTP. The racial/ethnic background of these offenders was 79% Caucasian, 19% American Indian, and 2% African-American. There were no Hispanics or Asians in the sample. Subjects were classified according to their instant offense and placed in one of three groups of criminal offense clusters.

1. Child Pornographer/Traveler (N= 62). These crimes involve the production, distribution, receipt, and possession of child pornography and crimes involving luring a child and traveling across state lines to sexually abuse a child.
2. Contact Sex Offender (N= 24). These crimes involve the sexual molestation, abuse, or assault of a child or adult.
3. Other (N= 4). These federal crimes are non-sexual offenses such as, bank robbery, mail fraud, or drug trafficking. All subjects except one did not have a history of sexual crimes for which they were previously adjudicated in state jurisdictions.

Results

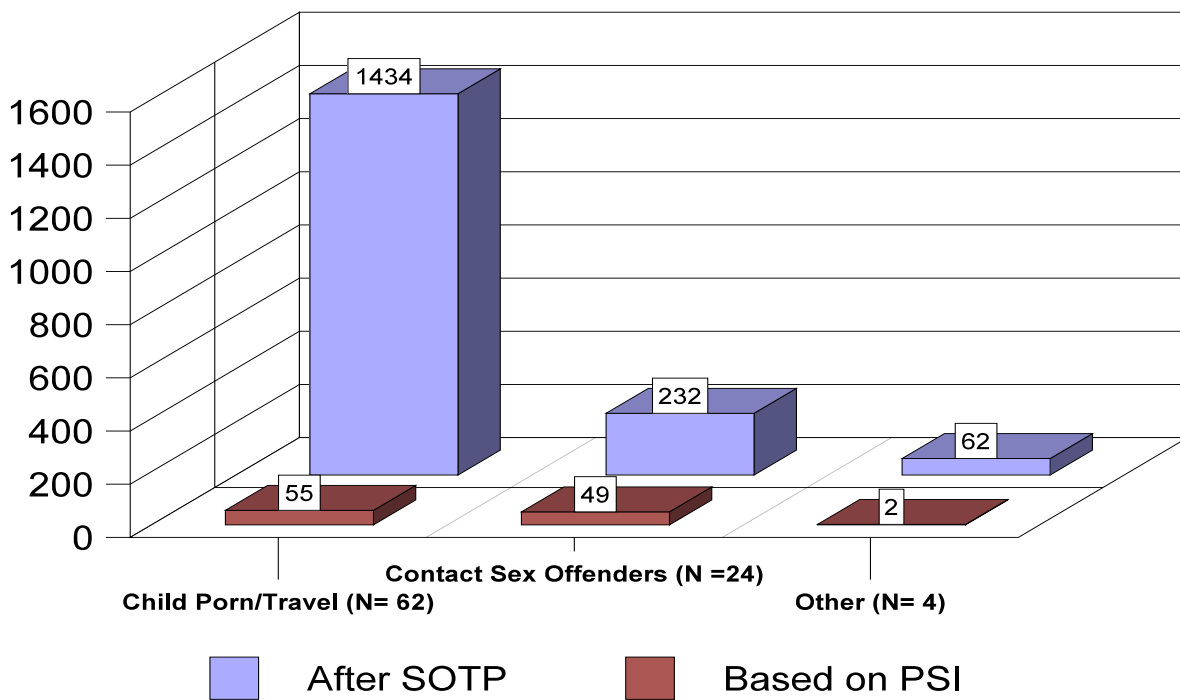
The review of clinical charts revealed that subjects in all three groups disclosed additional sexual crimes over the course of their participation in the SOTP. Subjects in the Child Porn/Travel and Other groups revealed extensive histories involving contact sexual crimes, including rape of adults and sexual abuse of minors. The 90 subjects in the sample recorded a total of 106 contact sexual crimes before they entered the SOTP (based on their PSI). After participation in the SOTP, these subjects divulged an additional 1,622 sexual crimes for which they were never detected by the criminal justice system (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Contact sexual crimes based on PSI and self-report after SOTP participation



Of the 62 subjects in the Child Porn/Travel group, 55 contact sexual crimes were documented on their PSI. After participation in the SOTP, these offenders admitted to an additional 1,379 contact sexual crimes for which they were never detected by or reported to the criminal justice system. Of the 24 subjects in the Contact Sex Offender group, 49 contact sexual crimes were documented on their PSI. After participation in the SOTP, these subjects admitted to committing an additional 183 contact sexual crimes for which they were never detected. Of the four subjects in the Other group, two contact sexual crimes were documented on their PSI. After participation in the SOTP, these subjects admitted to committing an additional 60 contact sexual crimes for which they were never detected (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Contact sexual crimes based on PSI and self-report after SOTP participation by criminal category



The increase in self-reported contact sexual crimes increased significantly in all three subject groups. The Child Porn/Travel group had an average of 0.89 victims per offender on the PSI, and 23.65 after participation in the Program. The Contact Sex Offender group had an average of 2.04 victims per offender on the PSI, and 9.6 after participation in the Program. Likewise, the Other group had an average of 0.5 victims per offender based on the PSI, and 15.5 after participation in the Program (see Table 1).

Table 1: The average number of contact sexual crimes for each subject group

	Child Porn/Travel (N=62)	Contact Sex Offender (N=24)	Other (N=4)
Average contact sex crimes based on PSI	0.89	2.04	0.5
Average contact sex crimes after SOTP	23.65	9.6	15.5
Range of self-reported contact sex crimes	0 to 202	1 to 40	0 to 25

Of the 62 subjects in the Child Porn/Travel group, 36 subjects had no documented history of contact sexual crimes based on the PSI. Of the 36 subjects in the Child Porn/Travel group with no prior history of contact sexual crimes based on their PSI, 15 (42%) subjects divulged no additional contact sexual crimes. If these 15 subjects are excluded from the calculations of average victims per offender, the subjects in the Child Porn/Travel group have an average of 30.5 victims per offender, rather than the 23.65 reported in the table above.

Of the 39 subjects in the Child Porn/Travel (36) and Other (3) groups who had no prior criminal history denoting a contact sexual crime, 24 subjects (62%), after participation in the SOTP, admitted to having committed 278 contact sexual crimes. These 24 subjects accounted for 19% of all of the sexual crimes committed by the Child Porn/Travel and Other subjects (see Table 2).

Table 2: Subjects without contact sexual crimes based on PSI who admitted to contact crimes

	Child Porn/Travel (N=36)	Contact Sex Offender (N=3)	Total (N=39)
Number of subjects in the group admitting to contact sexual crimes	21	3	24
Self-Reported contact sexual crimes after participation in SOTP	221	57	278

Discussion

The results of this study revealed findings consistent with other published studies on the incidence of sexual offending based on self-report (Abel, et al., 1987; Ahlmeyer, et al., 2000). While it is no surprise that sex offenders convicted of contact sexual crimes usually have committed more crimes than those for which they were apprehended, to date there has been no evidence to suggest that Internet sexual offenders (i.e., those in the Child Porn/Travel group)

engaged in sexual crimes other than the conduct for which they were convicted, particularly those involving physical/sexual contact with the victim. The results of the current investigation revealed that 76% of offenders convicted of crimes in the Child Porn/Travel category had contact sexual crimes. In fact, these offenders appear to have committed contact sexual offenses at higher rate (i.e., 30.5 victims per offender) than sex offenders convicted of contact sexual crimes (i.e., 9.6 victims per offender). There are some Internet sex offenders, however, whose PSI and self-report in the SOTP did not reveal any contact sexual crimes (25%).

These findings suggest that the majority of offenders convicted of Internet sexual crimes share similar behavioral characteristics as many child molesters. While these Internet sex offenders have unique patterns of sexual deviance, it appears that many can be equally predatory and dangerous as extra-familial child molesters. It is still unclear as to why some Internet sex offenders have had contact sexual crimes and others appear not to have had any. It may be that some offenders are simply denying past criminal behavior. Others may not have committed any contact sexual crimes because of lack of access to potential victims or poorly developed grooming and predatory skills. Future research should continue to examine this emerging and largely misunderstood criminal population.

References

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