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Original article

## Are Crimes by Online Predators Different From Crimes by Sex Offenders Who Know Youth In-Person?

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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** We examined cases in which sex offenders arrested for Internet-related crimes used the Internet for sexual communications with minors, comparing crimes by offenders who met victims online to those by offenders who knew victims in-person prior to the offense.

**Methods:** We collected data from a national sample of law enforcement agencies ( $n = 2,653$ ) about arrests in 2009 for Internet-related sex crimes against minors, conducting detailed telephone interviews with investigators about individual cases. This paper examines a subset of arrest cases that included the use of online sexual communications (online-meeting offenders,  $n = 143$ ; know-in-person/online offenders,  $n = 139$ ).

**Results and Conclusions:** Compared with know-in-person/online offenders, online-meeting offenders were less likely to have criminal backgrounds and more likely to use online communications to deceive victims. However, deception was a factor in a minority of cases and was also used by some know-in-person/online offenders. The majority of cases in both groups involved statutory rape (i.e., nonforcible illegal sexual activity with underage youth) or noncontact offenses such as child pornography production or sexual solicitation of a minor. We conclude that crimes by online-meeting offenders should not be treated as different or more dangerous than those by know-in-person/online offenders who use online sexual communications. Rather, prevention efforts should educate about the nature of statutory rape and related noncontact offenses. The primary message should be that it is criminal for adults to make sexual overtures to minors, online or offline, no matter what their relationship to the youth.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND  
 CONTRIBUTION

We challenge the view that “online predators” are distinctly dangerous sex offenders requiring specific programs to protect youth. When online sexual communication is involved, their crimes are highly similar to statutory rape by offenders whom victims know in-person. Comprehensive prevention programs addressing statutory rape would protect young people more effectively.

The threat of online predators targeting young adolescents for sex crimes has been the focus of more than a decade of media reports, research, and prevention efforts. These crimes by offenders who use the Internet to meet young victims, or “online-meeting” offenders, are often portrayed as singularly fiendish incidents in which sex offenders target children in online venues

(e.g., social networking sites, gaming sites, chat rooms) and use deceptive online communications to seduce or manipulate victims into situations where they will comply with offenders’ sexual demands [1–3]. These online seductions and manipulations include acts such as introducing talk of sex, showing a victim pornography, or asking a victim to perform sexual acts, with the intention that the victim’s sexual arousal will overcome inhibitions about engaging in sexual activity [4]. Some see crimes by online-meeting offenders as uniquely endangering children and teens, asserting that the anonymity of online communications has a “disinhibiting” effect, which causes naïve children and teens to be drawn into risky sexual interactions that they would normally avoid [2,5,6]. Internet safety materials and research studies often

*Conflicts of interest:* We know of no potential conflicts of interest. The study sponsor was not involved in the design or implementation of the research or in any aspect of this paper.

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describe this potential hazard of online communications as a key danger of sexual approaches by online-meeting offenders [2,7,8].

This notion of online-meeting offenders as dangerous, deceitful predators who use distinctive tactics has become part of the public discourse, despite research that shows most crimes by such offenders do not involve violence or deception and are not unique [9,10]. Most online-meeting offenders target adolescents and perpetrate nonforcible crimes involving illegal sexual contact with youth who are too young to consent to sexual activity (i.e., statutory rape). Offenders often use promises of love and romance to seduce victims or target adolescents who are looking for sexual experiences. However, this type of sex crime is not new, despite the use of online technologies to meet and communicate with victims. Violations of age-of-consent laws constitute as much as one quarter of reports of sex crimes against minors [11], although crimes by online-meeting offenders appear to comprise only a small percentage of statutory rape offenses [9,12]. Moreover, this focus on online-meeting offenders may overshadow the reality that most perpetrators of nonforcible sex crimes against children and adolescents do not meet victims online; they know them in-person prior to the offense [13].

Further, seducing or manipulating victims by introducing sexual content into interactions is not a novel sex offender strategy. It is a common tactic of sex offenders who are in-person acquaintances or victims. Sometimes called “grooming,” it was described in the literature before online communications existed [4,14,15], largely to explain how offenders who know victims in-person gain their trust and then abuse them, as seen in the cases of sports figures, youth workers, and priests, which have gotten considerable attention lately.

At the same time, there is evidence that such “know-in-person” offenders are increasingly using online communications to interact with victims. Among those individuals arrested for Internet-related sexual offenses in 2009, there were far more know-in-person offenders who victimized youth than there were online-meeting offenders who did (estimated 2,164 vs. 844, respectively) [12]. Despite the fact that rates of child sexual abuse have declined substantially since the mid-1990s [16–18], arrests for Internet-related sex crimes by know-in-person offenders more than doubled in 2009 compared to 2006, when there were an estimated 877 arrests [12]. These know-in-person offenders used technology in a variety of ways, including for online sexual communications with victims that involved talk of sex (e.g., questions about victims’ sexual experience, offers to educate victims about sex), sending nude images or pornography, urging victims to masturbate or soliciting sexual images from victims [19].

This paper takes up the question of whether crimes by arrested online-meeting offenders involving online sexual communications with victims were different from or more dangerous than those by offenders who knew victims in-person and used similar tactics. The question of differences is important because considerable effort and expense have gone into creating educational programs to prevent crimes by online-meeting offenders [20]. If data show that they or their crimes do not have substantially different or unusual characteristics, it would make sense to stop treating online-meeting offenders as a special category of sex offender requiring distinct prevention efforts. Young people may be better served by programs that focus on preventing sexual victimization from a broader range of offenders that includes those youth know in-person.

We address this question with data collected from a national sample of local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies about

arrests for Internet-related sex crimes in 2009. This paper examines a subset of cases that included online sexual communications with victims (online-meeting offenders,  $n = 143$ , know-in-person/online offenders,  $n = 139$ ). We use the term “know-in-person/online offenders” to emphasize these are a subset of know-in-person offenders, who used online sexual communications. We ask: Among those arrested for sex crimes against minors that included online sexual communications, were online-meeting offenders different or more dangerous than know-in-person/online offenders in terms of personal characteristics? Did online-meeting offenders target a different group of victims? Did they use different strategies to commit sex crimes or commit more dangerous offenses?

## Methods

We surveyed a stratified national sample of 2,653 law enforcement agencies by mail asking if they had made arrests for Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes during 2009. Then we conducted detailed telephone interviews with investigators about specific cases reported in the mail surveys.

## Sample

The data were collected as part of the Third National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV-3) Study. A three-frame stratified sample of agencies was used because Internet-related cases do not occur with equal probability among the more than 15,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies. The first frame included agencies mandated to investigate Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes ( $n = 176$ ); first frame agencies were sampled with certainty. The second frame consisted of agencies with staff trained in Internet-related child sexual exploitation cases ( $n = 1,636$ ), about half of which were randomly selected to participate in the study ( $n = 815$ ). The third frame consisted of all other local, county, and state law enforcement agencies in the United States ( $n = 13,572$ ), identified from an annually updated national directory of law enforcement agencies; about 12% were randomly selected for the sample ( $n = 1,662$ ).

## Procedures

We sent mail surveys to the heads of agencies with cover letters explaining the research. Reminder postcards and two follow-up mailings were sent to nonresponding agencies; then we called or faxed nonresponders to obtain completed surveys. The mail survey response rate was 86%.

When agencies reported relevant arrests, the survey asked for contact information for the primary investigator. Trained interviewers then contacted investigators to schedule interviews. Interviewers used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system to gather details about reported cases and they prepared narrative summaries of each case. The telephone interview response rate was 64%. Data were collected between March 2010 and March 2011. Table 1 provides more details about the sample disposition. Study procedures were approved by the University of New Hampshire Human Subjects Review Board.

## Measures

The mail survey asked: “Between **January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2009**, did your agency make ANY ARRESTS in cases

**Table 1**

Third National Juvenile Online Victimization Study final dispositions and response rates

Number of agencies in sample	2,653
No jurisdiction	190
Eligible agencies	2,463
Responded to mail survey	2,128 (86%)
Reported cases	590 (24%)
Number of arrest cases reported	4,010
Not selected for sample <sup>a</sup>	1,522 (38%)
Ineligible	459 (11%)
Number of arrest cases in sample	2,029
Nonresponders	471 (23%)
Refusals	159 (8%)
Invalid or duplicate cases	100 (5%)
Completed interviews	1,299 (64%)
Case did not involve an identified victim <sup>b</sup>	742
Online meeting, no online sexual communication <sup>c</sup>	28
Know-in-person/online, no online sexual communication <sup>d</sup>	247
Online sexual communication cases <sup>e</sup>	282
Online meeting offenders	143
Know-in-person/online offenders	139

<sup>a</sup> Cases of online sexual communications were not sampled; all were included.

<sup>b</sup> Crimes with no identified victim included possession and distribution of child pornography and soliciting an undercover investigator posing online as a minor.

<sup>c</sup> Examples include cases where offenders developed relationships with victims offline, victims sexually solicited adult offenders, or respondents did not know if offender had online sexual communications with victim.

<sup>d</sup> These cases involved production of child pornography without online sexual communications.

<sup>e</sup> For the sake of future meta-analysis, the data about these online sexual communication cases have not been described in previous publications.

involving the attempted or completed sexual exploitation of a minor, AND at least one of the following occurred: a. The offender and the victim first met on the Internet [or] b. The offender committed a sexual offense against the victim on the Internet, regardless of whether or not they first met online." Both the mail survey and telephone interview defined "Internet" as including cell phone use.

We classified arrested offenders based on answers to the telephone interview. Online-meeting offenders first met victims "on the Internet or through a cell phone (talking or text messaging)." Know-in-person/online offenders were family members or acquaintances of victims and knew them offline before the crime. Offenders had online sexual communications with victims if they "[brought] up sex or sex-related topics" during online interactions. Other measures were based on questions developed for the NJOV Study through interviews, pretesting, and piloting with law enforcement before Wave 1 data collection began.

#### Statistical analyses

Data were weighted to reduce bias resulting from variations in selection probabilities, response propensity, and nonresponse. We used weighted data to estimate numbers of arrests for crimes involving online sexual communications and conducted Chi-square cross-tabulations comparing online-meeting cases to know-in-person/online cases. We used STATA SE11 survey data analysis procedures, which take into account the variations in selection probabilities inherent in stratified samples when performing Chi-square tests. More detailed information is available in the NJOV3 Arrest Study Methods Report [21].

## Results

In 2009, there were an estimated 1,490 arrests for Internet-related sex crimes against minors that included online sexual communications with victims (95% confidence interval (CI): 1,330–1,649). An estimated 672 arrests were for crimes by online-meeting offenders (95% CI: 564–781); an estimated 817 were for crimes by know-in-person/online offenders (95% CI: 710–925).

*Were arrested online-meeting offenders different or more dangerous in terms of personal characteristics?*

Arrested online-meeting offenders who had online sexual communications with victims were similar to know-in-person/online offenders who used such tactics in several respects (Table 2). In each group, about half were age 25 years or younger and about half were employed full-time. Most were unmarried and did not live with partners. Few had prior arrests for sexual offenses against minors. About 15% possessed child pornography when they were arrested. However, online-meeting offenders were more likely to belong to minority racial or ethnic groups. Know-in-person/online offenders were more likely to live with children, have histories of violent behavior, problems with drugs or alcohol, and prior arrests for nonsexual offenses.

**Table 2**

Offender characteristics, 2009 arrests for sex crimes involving online sexual communications

	Online meeting offenders (n = 143) % (n)	Know-in-person/ online offenders (n = 139) % (n)
More than one offender <sup>a</sup>	5 (9)	5 (9)
Offender was family member of victim	n/a	11 (17)
Offender was acquaintance of victim	n/a	89 (122)
Offender age		
17 years or younger	8 (13)	13 (21)
18 to 25 years	43 (57)	36 (41)
26 to 39 years	36 (50)	30 (45)
40 years or older	13 (22)	22 (32)
Offender age 25 years or younger	51 (70)	48 (62)
Offender was female	1 (3)	5 (10)**
Offender and victim were same sex	11 (18)	12 (14)
Offender belonged to minority racial or ethnic group	32 (39)	13 (22)***
Employed full time	46 (76)	51 (71)
Single/not living with partner	82 (112)	71 (98)
Lived with child	16 (27)	33 (44)**
Diagnosed mental illness	3 (6)	3 (3)
Known violent behavior	4 (9)	15 (19)***
Problems with alcohol or drugs	11 (19)	29 (36)***
Prior arrest for nonsexual offenses	19 (33)	44 (57)***
Prior arrest sexual offense against minor	6 (11)	8 (9)
Registered sex offender at time of incident	4 (7)	2 (3)
Possessed child pornography downloaded from Internet	14 (31)	17 (23)

n/a = not applicable. Percentages are weighted and n's are unweighted. Percentages and n's may not be proportionate because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities and some cases have more influence than others.

<sup>a</sup> In cases with multiple offenders, questions about offender characteristics referred to a primary offender chosen based on the following algorithm: first, the offender who most directly used the Internet; if more than one, the offender who committed the most serious crimes; if more than one, the youngest offender.

\*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

*Did the online-meeting offenders target a different group of victims?*

Victims were largely similar, whether offenders met them online or knew them in-person (Table 3). In both categories of cases, the great majority of victims were girls and ages 13–17 years. The victim groups were similar in terms of family status, previous criminal victimization, delinquency, and problems with drugs or alcohol. The only distinction was that a higher percentage of victims of online-meeting offenders belonged to ethnic or racial minority groups.

*Did the online-meeting offenders use different strategies to commit sex crimes or commit more dangerous offenses?*

About three quarters of online-meeting offenders used both Internet and cell phones to facilitate their crimes while more than half of know-in-person/online offenders used cell phones only (Table 4). With one exception, most other case characteristics were similar. In both categories, online interactions lasted a month or more in most cases, and many offenders went beyond sexual conversations. About 40% of offenders in both groups asked victims to engage in sexual acts such as masturbation during online interactions, and about half sent or showed sexual pictures to or solicited sexual pictures from victims.

There were no statistically significant differences in the types of sexual offenses committed. In both categories, around 3% of

**Table 3**

Victim characteristics, 2009 arrests for sex crimes involving online sexual communications

	Online meeting offenders (n = 143) % (n)	Know-in-person/online offenders (n = 139) % (n)
Number of victims <sup>a</sup>		
One	83 (113)	83 (113)
Two	8 (14)	8 (13)
Three or more	10 (16)	9 (13)
Victim age		
5 years or younger	>1 (1)	0
6 to 12 years	10 (14)	12 (16)
13 to 17 years	90 (128)	88 (123)
Victim was male	10 (15)	15 (20)
Victim belonged to minority racial or ethnic group	24 (27)	12 (19)*
Victim lived with		
Both biological parents	45 (58)	46 (64)
Single parent	40 (54)	40 (51)
One biological and one step-parent	8 (18)	9 (15)
Someone else	2 (5)	3 (7)
Don't know who victim lived with	5 (8)	3 (2)
Victim had prior contact with police as crime victim	22 (22)	20 (25)
Delinquency <sup>b</sup>		
Had prior arrests or a juvenile record	7 (10)	9 (12)
Prior status offenses	15 (18)	14 (20)
Problems with alcohol or drugs	13 (14)	13 (14)
History of violence	6 (6)	6 (5)
None of the above	65 (98)	71 (100)

Percentages are weighted and n's are unweighted. Percentages and n's may not be proportionate because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities and some cases have more influence than others.

<sup>a</sup> In cases with multiple victims, questions about victim and crime characteristics referred to a primary victim chosen based on the following algorithm: first, the victim who most directly used the Internet; if more than one, the victim who was most seriously victimized; if more than one, the youngest.

<sup>b</sup> Only asked when victims were age 10 years or older, n = 139 for online meeting offenders and n = 138 for know-in-person/online offenders.

\* p < .05.

**Table 4**

Crime characteristics, 2009 arrests for sex crimes involving online sexual communications

	Online meeting offenders (n = 143) % (n)	Know-in-person/online offenders (n = 139) % (n)
Online communications used		
Both Internet and cell phone	76 (105)	32 (54)***
Cell phone only	10 (17)	59 (71)***
Internet only	13 (21)	9 (14)
Communicated online one month or more <sup>a</sup>	69 (94)	63 (85)
Additional online sexual interactions by offender		
Asked the victim to masturbate or engage in sexual acts <sup>a</sup>	39 (64)	42 (54)
Sent or showed sexual pictures to the victim <sup>a</sup>	47 (84)	48 (68)
Solicited sexual images from the victim	47 (82)	50 (72)
Offender deceived victim by claiming to be younger than 18 years	15 (22)	Not asked
Offender engaged in more elaborate deceit	6 (12)	2 (4)**
Victim claimed to be 18 years or older	20 (23)	Not asked
Type of sexual offense		
No contact offense	43 (68)	48 (69)
Fondling, inappropriate touching	2 (6)	7 (13)
Oral sex	6 (10)	5 (7)
Intercourse	45 (57)	37 (47)
Sexual violence	3 (2)	2 (3)
Case involved		
Production of child pornography	47 (84)	58 (85)
Youth-produced sexual images <sup>b</sup>	40 (70)	47 (70)
Coercion	9 (9)	11 (12)
Violence or threats	6 (8)	5 (10)
Blackmail	8 (14)	9 (14)
Drugs or alcohol given to victim	15 (25)	26 (23)
Abduction	>1 (1)	0
Illegal detention	3 (5)	1 (3)
Physical assault	2 (1)	1 (3)
Nonforcible crime <sup>c</sup>	80 (117)	83 (115)

Percentages are weighted and n's are unweighted. Percentages and n's may not be proportionate because results are weighted to reflect selection probabilities and some cases have more influence than others.

<sup>a</sup> More than 5% missing data.

<sup>b</sup> Images created by youth that meet legal definitions of child pornography. In many cases these images were solicited by offenders.

<sup>c</sup> No violence or threats, coercion, blackmail, abduction, detention, or physical assault.

\*\* p < .01.

\*\*\* p < .001.

cases involved sexual violence. Elements such as coercion, blackmail, abduction, illegal detention, or physical assault were uncommon and occurred at similar rates, no matter how the offender knew the victim. In both categories, considerable numbers of cases did not include contact sexual offenses. These were mostly cases of child pornography production. In many such cases offenders solicited victims to create sexual images of themselves (i.e., youth-produced sexual images). Some offenders were charged with other noncontact offenses, such as online luring or unlawful sexual solicitation of a minor.

There was, however, one difference in offense strategies. Online-meeting offenders were more likely to be deceptive in their online interactions. Fifteen percent of them deceived victims by claiming to be minors, and 6% perpetrated more elaborate deceptions. For example, a 38-year-old man posed online as a 19-year-old girl with cancer. He befriended numerous

teenage girls, sent many of them nude photos of a young woman and talked some of them into reciprocating. Such ploys were not unique to online-meeting offenders though. For instance, a youth group leader told several teen boys that he would help them with their dating problems by connecting them as friends on a social networking site with a 16-year-old girl he knew. He posed as the girl and solicited sexual images from the boys. In another case, a man used his step-son's cell phone and pretended to be the boy to sexually solicit one of the boy's classmates, a 13-year-old girl, via text messages. Although deception was more likely when offenders met victims online, it was an element in a small proportion of cases.

### Discussion

Our findings suggest there is little reason to view crimes by online-meeting offenders who had online sexual communications with victims as being different or more dangerous than those committed by offenders who knew victims in-person and used similar tactics. Crimes by online-meeting offenders were not distinguishable in most respects, with three main exceptions. First, online-meeting offenders were less likely to have criminal backgrounds, including problems with drugs or alcohol, histories of violent behavior, and prior arrests for nonsexual offenses. Second, online-meeting offenders were more likely to be deceptive in their online communications. Third, both online-meeting offenders and their victims were more likely to belong to minority racial and ethnic groups. These differences do not support the idea that crimes by online-meeting offenders are more dangerous. In fact, such offenders were less dangerous in terms of their criminal backgrounds, compared with know-in-person/online offenders. Although online-meeting offenders were more likely to use online communications to deceive victims, deception occurred in few cases and was not exclusive to those who met victims online. Some know-in-person/online offenders also lied about their identities and created deceptive online personas to trick victims. Further, despite more deception, crimes by online-meeting offenders were not more likely to put youth in physical danger. Incidents of coercion, violence, blackmail, abduction, illegal detention, and physical assault were relatively rare and rates were similar in crimes by both online-meeting and know-in-person/online offenders. Also, our data did not point to an explanation of the higher proportion of racial and ethnic minorities among online-meeting offenders and their victims, but these findings do not relate to dangerousness.

Crimes involving online sexual communications are a subset of sex crimes against children in that most victims, 90%, were teens and few perpetrators were minors, about 10% compared with about 33% for all sex crimes against children [13]. Further, the crimes we examined conformed to what we know about crimes involving statutory rape. Force or coercion were rare; most victims were adolescents and girls; and most arrested offenders were young men [22]. Victims were old enough to have some degree of autonomy, private access to communication devices such as cell phones, and interests in intimacy, romance, and sex. Nonetheless, despite these similarities the cases in our study were quite diverse, as are cases of statutory rape in general [23]. In both of the categories we examined, offenders ranged from young men motivated by inappropriate but genuine romantic feelings to long-term serial offenders with past offenses and large collections of child pornography. Many cases involved the production of child pornography. Some victims were subjected to violence and blackmail. Yet other victims were openly seeking sexual experience, including some young teens who posed online as adults.

Practitioners who encounter adolescents caught up in such crimes should understand that they may react differently than other victims of sexual abuse. Victims of statutory rape often feel strong romantic or sexual bonds to offenders and may not view these incidents as criminal [10,22]. It is important to remember that an underage victim's actions are irrelevant because statutory rape laws exist to protect young adolescents from being exploited by adults with more experience and power [4].

Because the two groups of arrested offenders we compared both used online sexual communications, our findings do not shed light on whether such communications increase youth vulnerability to sexual victimization. In our view, the research in support of online communications having a "disinhibiting" effect, which lowers inhibitions and makes youth more likely to respond to sexual overtures is slim. Assertions about the disinhibiting effect of anonymous online communications are based on research about nonsexual topics such as verbal aggression and self-disclosure (e.g., [24,25]). We are not aware of research that specifically addresses whether sexual inhibitions are reduced more in response to online compared with in-person sexual advances. As noted earlier, seduction, manipulation, and grooming have long been seen as effective sex offender strategies. Currently, it is not clear whether offenders who use online sexual communications are more or less or equally successful compared with offenders who pursue in-person sexual interactions. In fact, interactions that sexually arouse a targeted youth may have disinhibiting effects however they occur. Because it is well-established that sex offenders who commit nonforcible crimes often seduce victims, we recommend that education programs that aim to prevent victimization be candid with adolescents about how offenders use such tactics, both online and in-person. Youth should be told that it is normal to feel sexually aroused when they see or hear talk of sex, view pornography, or are touched in intimate ways, but that sex offenders may strive to exploit that normal arousal. The important point is to educate young people so they recognize inappropriate sexual advances whether made online or in-person, have strategies to respond and understand the importance of reporting such incidents even if there was sexual activity with an offender, again either online or in-person.

In some respects, online sexual communications may be safer than in-person encounters with sex offenders. For one, the lack of physical proximity to an offender may stave off physical contact. A youth initially drawn in by an online sexual interaction may reconsider, or the interaction may be discovered and short-circuited because online communications can be more readily intercepted and confirmed than in-person conversations. Also, online interactions may increase the likelihood that an offender will be prosecuted and convicted because incriminating evidence can be gleaned from cell phones and computers. On the other hand, online communications may facilitate certain sexual offenses that do not require physical contact, such as child pornography production with adolescent victims, arrests for which appear to be growing [26]. Education programs should warn young people that sex offenses include online interactions by adults who send minors pornography, expose themselves on Web cams, or solicit sexual images or cybersex from minors.

### Limitations

Our data pertain only to Internet-related cases that ended in arrest during 2009 and involved online sexual communications.

We did not have a sample of cases with no technology use, so our results do not shed light on whether communication tactics or the risk of sexual victimization differ when there is no online sexual communication. Further, all of the data were gathered from law enforcement investigators. They did not always have full information about cases, and some of their answers could have been biased by training or professional attitudes. Also, although the study was designed to yield a nationally representative sample of arrest cases, sometimes samples are skewed. The margin of error could be larger than calculated. We conducted multiple significance tests, which can increase Type I error. Finally, keeping up with rapidly changing technologies and police responses is a challenge for researchers. Aspects of crimes may have changed since 2009.

We conclude that crimes by online-meeting offenders who had online sexual communications with victims were not different or more dangerous than those by offenders who knew victims in-person and used similar tactics. The majority of cases in both groups involved nonforcible illegal sexual activity with underage youth, that is, statutory rape. There were few differences in offender, victim, or crime characteristics, with two relevant exceptions. The online meeting offenders were less likely to have criminal backgrounds and more likely to use online communications to deceive victims. However, deception was a factor in a minority of cases and also used by some know-in-person/online offenders. Few cases involved elements such as blackmail, abduction, or physical assault, and these occurred at similar rates in both groups.

Rather than programs that focus exclusively on crimes by online-meeting offenders, prevention efforts should educate youth, families, and the public about the nature of statutory rape offenses in general and about offender tactics that include seduction, manipulation, and grooming, both online and in-person. Although programs should include information about ways that both online-meeting and know-in-person offenders may use online communications to deceive victims, this should not be emphasized over more typical case scenarios. Youth should know that illegal acts include noncontact offenses such as soliciting youth for sex, asking youth to masturbate or engage in cybersex, or sending or soliciting sexual images, whether these incidents happen online or offline and no matter what the relationship to the offender.

A great deal of effort and money is being spent on programs to educate youth and parents specifically about crimes by online-meeting offenders. We do not advocate that education programs disregard or gloss over the role of the Internet in sex crimes. However, resources to prevent sexual victimization are scarce and comprehensive programs that address statutory rape and teach youth to understand and resist sexual advances from adults, whether met online or in-person and whether made through online communications or in-person, would do more to protect young people.

### Acknowledgments

This project was funded by Grant No. 2009-SNB-90001 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The total amount of federal funding is \$825,704. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

We are grateful to the many law enforcement investigators who participated in this research and to the talents, perseverance, and skills of research assistants Kristina Breton, Elisabeth Cloyd, Matthew Cutler, Laura Healey, Kaitlin Lounsbury, Marisa MacDonnell, Dianne Ramey, Lynn Russ, and Samantha Senechal.

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