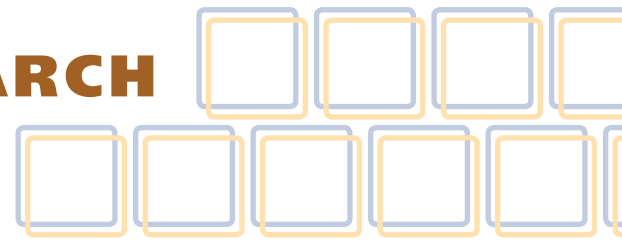




# SOMAPI RESEARCH BRIEF

SEX OFFENDER MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING INITIATIVE

Luis C.deBaca, Director • July 2015



## Internet-Facilitated Sexual Offending

by Michael Seto, Ph.D.

### Introduction

There is increasing public and professional concern about Internet-facilitated sexual offending, reflected in a greater number of prosecutions and clinical referrals for these crimes (Middleton, Mandeville-Norden, & Hayes, 2009; Motivans & Kyckelhahn, 2007; DOJ, 2010). Internet sexual offending comprises a range of crimes, including possession or distribution of child pornography; production of child pornography; sexual solicitations (online interactions with minors for sexual purposes, including plans to meet offline); and conspiracy crimes, for example, collaborating with others to distribute or produce child pornography or to solicit minors. The large majority of online offenses involve possession or distribution of child pornography.

It is hard to obtain precise estimates of Internet sexual offending in the United States, as there is no national system for integrating information about Internet offenders at the state level and there are state-by-state variations in the applicable laws. However, the National Juvenile Online Victimization survey, conducted in 2000 and again in 2009, indicates that the number of arrests in the United States for Internet sex crimes has tripled over that time (Wolak, 2012; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011).

The increase in Internet sexual offending has been paralleled by a decrease in the number of reported child sexual abuse cases, and a decrease in violent crime more broadly (Mishra & Lalumière, 2009; Finkelhor & Jones, 2006). This indicates that Internet sexual offending is a new phenomenon that may not be influenced by the same contextual factors as other kinds of sexual or violent crime. An important research question is the extent to which Internet sex offenders represent a new type of sex offender, or whether they reflect the transformation of conventional sexual offending through the adoption of new technologies (Seto & Hanson, 2011).

### About SOMAPI

In 2011, the SMART Office began work on the Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative (SOMAPI), a project designed to assess the state of research and practice in sex offender management. As part of the effort, the SMART Office contracted with the National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) and a team of subject-matter experts to review the literature on sexual offending and sex offender management and develop summaries of the research for dissemination to the field. These summaries are available online at <http://smart.gov/SOMAPI/index.html>.

A national inventory of sex offender management professionals also was conducted in 2011 to gain insight about promising practices and pressing needs in the field. Finally, a Discussion Forum involving national experts was held in 2012 for the purpose of reviewing the research summaries and inventory results and refining what is currently known about sex offender management.

Based on the work carried out under SOMAPI, the SMART Office has published a series of Research Briefs, each focusing on a topic covered in the sexual offending and sex offender management literature review. Each brief is designed to get key findings from the literature review into the hands of policymakers and practitioners. Overall, the briefs are intended to advance the ongoing dialogue related to effective interventions for sexual offenders and provide policymakers and practitioners with trustworthy, up-to-date information they can use to identify what works to combat sexual offending and prevent sexual victimization.



This brief addresses Internet-facilitated sexual offending. It summarizes what is scientifically known about the topic and identifies policy implications, knowledge gaps, and unresolved controversies that emerge from the extant research and that might serve as a catalyst for future empirical study.

## Summary of Research Findings

### Offender Motivations

#### Sexual interest in children

Many, but not all, Internet offenders are motivated by a sexual interest in children. This has been demonstrated in a recent study showing that the majority of Canadian child pornography offenders assessed at a sexual behavior clinic showed more sexual arousal (assessed through penile plethysmography responses in the laboratory) to children than to adults and, in fact, showed a stronger relative response than do offenders with contact victims (Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006). The relationship between child pornography offending and pedophilia is sufficiently robust that child pornography use has been included as specific behavioral evidence in the proposed revision of the psychiatric diagnostic criteria for pedophilia, defined clinically as “persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children” ([www.dsm5.org](http://www.dsm5.org); Seto, 2010).

#### Sexual interest in adolescents

In addition, research by the Crimes against Children Research Center suggests that solicitation offenders target young adolescents, typically between the ages of 13 and 15, which would not be consistent with the clinical diagnosis of pedophilia (because many of the adolescents involved would be showing some signs of sexual and physical maturation) (Wolak et al., 2008).

Briggs and colleagues (2011) have suggested that there is a distinction between fantasy-driven and contact-driven solicitation offenders. The former group engages in online activities (such as sexual chat, exchange of pornographic images, or exhibitionism via Webcam) that are gratifying in and of themselves, often resulting in orgasm while online, but are not interested in or likely to commit contact sexual offenses against children. The latter group, in contrast, engages in online activities in order to arrange real-world meetings; their online activity is more directed towards meeting offline and

shorter in duration than the online interactions of fantasy-driven offenders. Given the small sample size (30 contact-driven and 21 fantasy-driven offenders) and exploratory nature of this study, more research is needed to determine if this distinction between solicitation offenders is valid and meaningful.

For cases resulting in actual meetings between an adult and a minor, sexual contact typically occurred on multiple occasions (Wolak et al., 2008). Solicitation offenders may have more in common with statutory sex offenders—who have sexual contacts with minors who agree to the interactions but are below the legally defined age of consent—than they do with pedophilic offenders who target young children.

### Contact Offending History

In a recent meta-analysis (an analysis combining the results of many evaluations into one large study with many subjects), Seto and colleagues (2011) reviewed available studies and identified 21 samples of Internet offenders (a total of 4,464 mostly child pornography offenders, although some samples also included solicitation offenders) with information about their contact offending histories. On average, 1 in 8 online offenders had an official criminal record for contact sexual offending. In the six samples with self-report data, a little over half (55 percent) admitted to a history of contact sexual offending, usually as a result of clinical involvement and/or polygraph examination. Therefore, the established risk measures that are available for contact sex offenders may not apply to the Internet population. Further research is needed to identify the factors that distinguish those who have committed hands-on offenses against a child from those who do not commit such offenses. This empirical knowledge would advance the understanding of the risk of recidivism and the relationship between online and offline offending.

### Contact Offending in the Future

Seto and colleagues (2011) also reviewed recidivism rates from nine samples of Internet offenders (2,630 online offenders) followed for an average of slightly more than 3 years. They found that 4.6 percent of Internet offenders committed a new sexual offense of some kind during this time period, with 2 percent committing a contact sexual offense and 3.4 percent committing a new child pornography offense; some offenders committed both types of crimes. Although the followup times are relatively short for this kind of research, and recidivism



rates are expected to increase with more opportunity, these recidivism rates are lower than those observed in recidivism studies of offline offenders (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005) and belie the idea that all Internet offenders pose a high risk of committing contact offenses in the future.

## Recidivism Risk Factors

Research is beginning to emerge on the factors that predict recidivism among Internet sex offenders, although more studies—using large samples, a set of theoretically or empirically plausible risk factors, longer followup times, and comprehensive criminal records—are clearly needed. These initially identified risk factors appear to be the same kinds of risk factors seen in decades of research on contact sex offenders, and in research on all kinds of offenders generally. For example, recent studies have shown that well-established nonsexual criminological factors such as offender age at time of first arrest, prior criminal history, and failure on prior conditional release (such as bail or parole) can predict sexual recidivism among child pornography offenders (Seto & Eke, 2005; Eke, Seto, & Williams, 2011). Unpublished data suggest that other factors (such as substance use problems and admissions of sexual interest in children) can also predict contact sexual offending (e.g., Eke & Seto, 2012). Among child pornography offenders, the ratio of content depicting boys compared to girls predicts child pornography recidivism (Eke & Seto, 2012), which is in line with much research showing that contact sex offenders who target boys are more likely to be pedophiles and more likely to sexually reoffend than those who target girls (Seto, 2008).

As well, Wakeling and colleagues (2001) showed that a modified version of an established risk measure (the Risk Matrix 2000; Thornton, 2007) could predict sexual recidivism in a large sample of Internet offenders in the United Kingdom. Risk Matrix items include offender age, sexual offense and any other sentencing history, having a male victim, having a stranger victim, ever having a live-in romantic relationship, and having any noncontact offenses. Wakeling and her colleagues obtained recidivism data on 1,326 offenders followed for 1 year (2.1 percent recidivism rate) and 994 of these offenders followed for 2 years (3.1 percent recidivism rate). The Risk Matrix was significantly predictive to a similar degree as with contact offenders. Three-quarters of the new sexual offenses were for Internet crimes. If

this research—showing that the same risk factors that are useful in predicting recidivism among conventional contact sex offenders operate in a similar fashion for Internet offenders—holds up in subsequent replications, then clinicians will be empirically justified in using modified versions of existing risk measures to assess Internet offenders, such as the Static-99 (Harris et al., 2003) or Risk Matrix 2000.

## Intervention

There is relatively little literature on the treatment of Internet offenders. Typically, knowledge about characteristics and risk of recidivism is established before knowledge about treatment approaches and outcomes, because of the time it takes to develop and implement programs and then evaluate them for recidivism. Sex offender treatment and supervision professionals are struggling to respond to the increasing influx of Internet offenders. Key questions have yet to be addressed regarding intervention—including what the priority treatment targets are, how they should be targeted, and whether interventions can reduce recidivism.

The most clearly articulated program at this time appears to be the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (i-SOTP) developed by Middleton and colleagues in the United Kingdom. This program was created as a result of treatment provider concerns about mixing Internet and contact offenders in group therapy as well as questions about the applicability of some treatment components and targets of conventional contact sex offender treatment programs (McGrath et al., 2009). The program is intended to be less intense than the standard conventional sex offender program available in the United Kingdom; it involves fewer (20 to 30) sessions in either individual or group format and more Internet-relevant content. Research is needed to determine if the treatment approach is effective for Internet offenders.

## Research Limitations, Conclusions, and Policy Implications

It is clear from this review that research on Internet offending is relatively new and that there are substantial gaps in our knowledge about Internet offenders and the crimes they commit. At the same time, research



conducted over the past 10 years (paralleling the emergence of the Internet in everyday life) sheds some helpful light on some key issues.

## Increasing demand

There is consistent evidence that the number of Internet sexual offending cases is increasing rapidly, with major implications for law enforcement, criminal justice, correctional, and clinical agencies. More precise state-by-state data are needed, however, to better understand the breadth and depth of this increasing demand in order to allocate resources wisely.

## Solicitation offenders

Most of the research on Internet offenders has focused on child pornography offenders. Less is known about the characteristics, contact offending history, and risk of recidivism posed by solicitation offenders, and the extent to which they differ from child pornography offenders and contact sex offenders.

## Internet offending types

Emerging research suggests that solicitation offenders are different from child pornography offenders in meaningful ways. In particular, child pornography offenders are likely to be pedophiles, whereas solicitation offenders appear to be predominantly interested in adolescent girls. This apparent difference in Internet offender motivations may translate to differences in contact offending history, risk of recidivism, and the likely targets of other criminal sexual behavior (young children vs. adolescent minors).

## Overlap with contact offending

Only 1 in 8 Internet offenders has an official record for contact offending, based on available studies (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011). The proportion rises to approximately 4 in 8 when self-reported offending is added, but this still falls short of the idea that most or all Internet offenders have already committed contact offenses. Internet offenders and conventional sex offenders are not synonymous groups. An important area for future research is to explore the relationship between Internet and contact offending.

## Risk to reoffend

More research is needed, but an analysis of nine available follow-up studies suggests that Internet offenders, as a group, have a relatively low risk of sexually recidivating compared to conventional contact sex offenders. Research distinguishing between different types of Internet offenders will likely be helpful in identifying higher risk Internet offenders who need more intensive interventions.

## Intervention

More research on the onset and maintenance of Internet sexual offending is needed to design effective interventions for those who require it. Existing interventions represent adaptations of current sex offender treatment models, which may or may not work for Internet offenders. Although other areas require research attention as well, intervention is the area with the largest gaps in knowledge.

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### ABOUT SMART

The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 authorized the establishment of the Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART) Office within OJP. SMART is responsible for assisting with implementation of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), and also for providing assistance to criminal justice professionals across the entire spectrum of sex offender management activities needed to ensure public safety.