"Virtual Traps - 5 Facts about Online Sexual Abuse & Exploitation of Children"

Introduction

The widespread prevalence of pornography and sexually explicit material involving children and teenagers is indisputable. The Internet has diversified the sex industry and created new and growing markets for sexual services.[1] Recognizing this diversification, researchers have begun to study the exposure of children and teenagers to pornography, their role in it's production, and how sexual offenders act in the realm of pornography and the online sexual exploitation of children and teenagers. In this brief report, we focus on 5 facts concerning children and teens and the proliferation of the online sex industry, which results in the widespread sexual exploitation of youth.

Fact #1: Online Sex-related extortion, or "sextortion", is on the rise

Cyber-harassment and cyberbullying are reported to be incorporating a new tactic, mainly blackmail.[2] Sex-related extortion ("sextortion") involves perpetrators blackmailing victims with information and photos likely acquired online.[3] The blackmail is often expressed in demands that victims produce sexually suggestive, provocative, and explicit content and/or engage in sexual acts.[4] The harassment can consist of constant emails, text messages, and social media communication and can escalate to victims' pictures being put online for family and friends to see.[5] Cyberbullying is similar, but is distinguished by the perpetrator's primary goal being to embarrass the victim.[6] Another distinguishing marker is that in cyberbullying, the perpetrator may not be known to the victim, while the perpetrator is known by the victim in cases of cyber-harassment.[7]

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[1] See: Hughes, D. (2000). The Internet and Sex Industries. *Technology and Society Magazine IEEE, 19*(1), 35-42, doi: 10.1109/44.828562.

[2] UNODC. (2014). Study on the Effects of New Information Technologies on the Abuse and Exploitation of Children. Accessed from: https://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CCPCJ/CCPCJ_Sessions/CCPCJ_23/E-CN15-2014-CRP1_E.pdf?listlang[]=***CURRENT_LANGUAGE***&language=en, p. 13.

[3] Ibid., p. 13.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See http://stopcyberbullying.org/what_is_cyberbullying_exactly.html., as cited in Ibid UNODC (2014).

[7] Quayle, E., et al. In: Ainsaar, M., Lööf, L. (eds.). P. 13, as cited in Ibid UNODC (2014).

Fact #2: The intersection between a child's real identity and their created, online identity can lead to experiences of abuse and exploitation.

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre reports that the possibility to be someone else online and overall create a new identity, can result in exploitation for unsuspecting teenagers.[8] The widespread use of the Internet exacerbates this phenomenon by providing increased access for offenders to potential teen victims. For example, a 2011 study showed an increase from 14.9 to 17.1 hours spent online weekly for 12-15 year olds.[9] Additionally, research from the CEOP Centre indicates that "the most common offending environment was social networking (SN) at 48.5%".[10] This evidence coupled with the widespread and nearly continuous online presence of teens provides increased opportunities for perpetrators to exploit teens seeking adventure and to take risks they associate with the person they would like to be through their online identity.[11]

Fact #3: Teenagers identifying as homosexual or unclear about their sexual orientation are more at risk of online sexual exploitation.

According to the 'Online behavior related to child sexual abuse' report, this group of children could be more vulnerable, because of their high interest in questions relating to sexuality.[12] When searching online for information regarding homosexuality and sexuality, they might be looking for people who had similar experience, and therefore might confide more easily in adults that appear to offer them support, but who are actually predators.

Problematic offline meetings, which sometimes involve being convinced or forced to have sex, that are arranged from online contacts, are more predominant among young homosexual teens, in comparison to other young people.

In a 2009 nationwide study conducted by the Swedish National Board of Youth Affairs with 6,000 young people, 18.8% of young people aged 16-25, who were homosexual, bisexual or transsexual posted sexy pictures/videos.[13]

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[8] The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre. (2013). Threat Assessment of Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Accessed from:
http://ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/CEOP_TACSEA2013_240613%20FINAL.pdf
[9] Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report, Ofcom, 2012., as cited in Ibid CEOP Centre (2013).
[10] Ibid, p. 11.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Mare Ainsaar and Lars Loof. Online Behaviour related to child sexual abuse. ROBERT. Accessed from: http://www.childcentre.info/robert/public/Online_behaviour_related_to_sexual_abuse.pdf
[13] Ibid., page 41.

Fact #4: The live streaming of child abuse and rape for payment is of concern.

Offenders, who sexually exploit children online, are becoming more skilled and innovative in using technological developments, such as the availability of mobile devices and of Internet coverage, in order to profit financially. This has led to the rise in live streaming of child abuse and rape.

According to a Europol report,[14] a video with new material can cost from 10 dollars up to 1,200 dollars. Some people pay annual or monthly subscriptions for camera shots, paying through credit card transfers. Investigations in some EU Member States has led to the successful prosecution of EU citizens for live web stream sexual offenses, with crucial rulings that child sexual exploitation through the Internet is equivalent to rape. One concern for the future is the development in payment methods.

Fact #5: Younger kids are increasingly vulnerable to online sexual content exploitation.

In partnership with Microsoft, the Internet Foundation created a quantitative study of youth-produced sexual content online, based on a three-month period between September and November 2013.[15] The study determined that 18.5% of content represented children 15 years or younger, with 91% being girls. Out of the total number, 40% of online child sexual abuse material, involving children younger than 15, depicted children 7-10, while other 42% showed children aged 11-13.[16]

Moreover, 85.9% of the content depicting children aged 15 or younger was created using a webcam.[17] Many of videos of the total videos and images produced are being redistributed to third party websites, meaning that control over their removal or subsequent distribution has been lost.

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[14] Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Online. (2013). Europol. Accessed from: https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/commercial-sexual-exploitation-children-online

[15] Child Protection Hub for Southeast Europe. (2015). http://childhub.org//child-protection-news/emerging-patterns-and-trends-report-1-online-produced-sexual-content?listlang[]=***CURRENT_LANGUAGE***&language=

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.