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Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault Among U.S. Adolescents Reported in Newspapers, 1996–2007

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Abstract

This article provides an assessment over time of the incidence of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assaults among U.S. adolescents undergoing adjudication from 1996 to 2007. Of 812 newspaper reports of adjudicated Internet-initiated sexual assault, most (79.2%) victims were female, and the median age was 14 years. The incidence rate of these reports increased over the 12-year period for females but remained steady for males. The frequency of these assaults was much less than reported for other types of sexual assaults in this age group. These estimates hopefully will assist in a greater understanding of these assaults, aid in interventions to decrease their occurrence, and guide effective policymaking that will reduce all types of sexual assault among adolescents.

Keywords

child abuse; sex offenders; crime victims

According to the results of a national study, the proportion of U.S. adolescents who report having used the Internet at least once within the previous 6 months increased from approximately 73% in 2000 to 93% in 2009 (Pew Research Center, 2011). Along with this

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rise in usage have been numerous reports in the popular press and a few studies in research journals of sexual assault against adolescents that were initiated through Internet contact (Briggs, Simon, & Simonsen, 2011; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2010; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007; Walsh & Wolak, 2005; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). Previous estimates of the incidence of Internet-initiated sexual assault have been based on surveys of adolescents and law enforcement agencies (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011; Wolak et al., 2004). The role the Internet plays in facilitating sexual assaults against adolescents may be small, given that sexual crimes against this population are more commonly perpetrated by persons well known to victims (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). In addition, there have been national reductions in rates of reported sexual assaults against adolescents (Finkelhor & Jones, 2006) and declines in reports of Internet-related sexual solicitations toward adolescents (Jones et al., 2011; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006).

In an attempt to understand the incidence of Internet-initiated sexual assault, Wolak, Finkelhor, and Mitchell (2004, 2009) estimated reports of Internet-related sexual crimes (e.g., sexual assault, child pornography) against adolescents (12- to 17-year-olds) through the National Juvenile Online Victimization Study conducted over two 12-month periods. Through a survey of law enforcement agencies, the investigators received reports of 129 arrests for Internet-initiated completed or attempted sexual crimes from July 1, 2000, through June 30, 2001. Of these 129 arrests, the victim and offender met in person in 74% of cases (99 arrests), and of these, direct sexual contact (sexual intercourse, oral sex, or other form of penetrative sex) occurred in 89% cases (88 arrests) in this 1-year period. The majority of the victims of Internet-initiated sexual assault were between 13 and 15 years old (76%) and female (75%). Of the 129 offenders of Internet-initiated sexual assault, 99% were male and 47% were more than 20 years older than their victims.

In a second survey of law enforcement agencies, the investigators received reports of 120 arrests for Internet-initiated attempted or completed sexual crimes in 2006. The majority of the 120 victims of Internet-initiated sexual assault were between 13 and 15 years old (73%) and female (84%). Of the 120 offenders of Internet-initiated sexual assault, 99% were male. A larger percentage of offenders of Internet-initiated sexual assault were 18 to 25 years old in 2006 than 2000 (40% versus 23%). It is not known whether the cases identified in the two 1-year periods reflect the current and full extent of the frequency of this problem and if changes over time in the frequency and demographic characteristics of those involved have occurred concurrent with the growth of Internet usage by adolescents.

In this study, we identified newspaper reports of Internet-initiated sexual assault among U.S. adolescents undergoing adjudication or resulting in convictions over a 12-year period (1996–2007) in order to assess the demographic profiles of victims and offenders and to evaluate the frequency with which these types of assaults are reported in newspapers over time. This type of case identification has been successfully used for other investigations in which the nature of the event is sensitive or no national case files exist (Calloway, Jorgensen, Saraiya, & Tsui, 2006; Durrheim & Leggat, 1999; Hagihara, Tarumi, & Abe, 2007; Heggie, 2005; Kraus & Li, 2006; Leggat & Leggat, 2003). Of course, the uniqueness of the cases, the interests of the newspapers' audiences, the size and circulation of the newspapers, the

availability of details of the events, perhaps the “sensational” nature of the events, and how often adolescents or their parents/guardians file charges against offenders likely influence the nature, frequency, and accuracy of newspaper reports of Internet-initiated sexual assaults. However, there are no longitudinal databases to review to estimate the frequency of Internet-initiated sexual assault over time, which leaves newspaper reports as one means of estimating how often these types of assaults are at least reported and known to the judicial system and the public. Along with U.S. Census figures, we estimated the incidence rates of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated against U.S. adolescents that underwent adjudication across the 12-year period and compared the incidence rates by gender and age. The ultimate goal of this investigation was to provide a current assessment about the frequency of these events that have occurred during the period of increasing Internet usage in this population to further guide initiatives to prevent these and other types of sexual assaults.

METHOD

Study Design

This study entailed a review of U.S. adolescent sexual assault cases that were initiated through Internet contacts and resulted in adjudication as reported in the press. Cases were identified through newspaper reports published between 1996 and 2007. The study was exempted from review by the hospital institutional review board.

Study Population

Cases of newspaper-reported adolescent Internet-initiated sexual assault undergoing adjudication were included in the study if they met three criteria: (a) the victim of the assault was identified in the newspaper account as an adolescent (age 17 years) and the offender was identified as an adult (age 17 years), (b) the victim and offender’s initial contact was through the Internet, and (c) a sexual assault occurred subsequent to the Internet contact. A 17-year-old could be either a sexual assault victim or offender depending on the age of consent in the state in which the assault occurred. The age of consent ranges from 14 to 18 years old across states (Norman-Eady, Reinhart, & Martino, 2003). A 17-year-old was considered a victim if the age of consent was 18 years old in his or her state and a sexual assault occurred. A 17-year-old was considered an offender if the age of consent was 17 years old or younger in his or her state and a sexual assault occurred involving a victim younger than the age of consent.

We used the U.S. Department of Justice’s (2011) definition of sexual assault as “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient of the unwanted sexual activity ... state law assumes that a person does not consent to sexual activity if he or she is ... a minor” (para. 1). This definition includes forcible and nonforcible (“consensual”) sexual contact. For all cases, the offenders had been accused of sexually assaulting one or more adolescents and the cases were undergoing adjudication (i.e., under arrest or on trial) or the offender had been convicted of the assault. Sexual assault victims who did not reside in the United States were not included, but offenders who did not reside in the United States yet traveled to the United States to commit the assault were included.

Victims who were U.S. residents who met their offender and were assaulted outside the United States were included.

Case Identification

Cases of newspaper-reported adjudicated Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents were identified in English language U.S. and non-U.S. newspapers included in the LexisNexis Academic online computerized database. LexisNexis Academic contains full-text documents from over 5,600 publications, including 1,233 newspapers from around the world. LexisNexis Academic is searchable by news category (e.g., general news, U.S. news), news source (e.g., major papers, magazines, and journals), the geographic coverage of the paper (e.g., international, national, regional, state, local), year of publication, and by the entry of search terms into a free-text search field.

To identify cases of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents, we searched for newspaper accounts from 1996 to 2007 on this topic in the general news and U.S. news categories. The searches were conducted in a systematic manner by year of publication, geographic coverage of the paper, and by free-text entry of search terms. Because LexisNexis Academic does not use standard terms in the free-text term searches, the study authors formulated a list of terms that might identify Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents. Initially there were 10 free-text search terms selected (sexual assault, sexual abuse, sex abuse, Internet, online, chat, net, Web, chat room, chatroom). However, we observed that four of these terms (net, Web, chat room, chatroom) were not useful in the searches and thus they were dropped from the systematic search for cases. The remaining six terms were used for the free-text fields in the searches. Three of these terms represented sexual assault and the other three the Internet. Each sexual assault term was paired with each of Internet terms for the free-text fields in the searches.

We created a database to record the details of relevant cases of Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents reported in the newspaper articles. Specifically, we documented the name of offender(s); the age, gender, and region of residence of the victim(s) and the offender(s); the number of victims and offenders involved in the sexual assault; the region and type of community in which the assault occurred; the year that the assault occurred; and the year the newspaper article was published. For data points that were not available through a particular article on LexisNexis Academic, we conducted Internet searches using the name of offenders or other relevant details from the articles to complete our database. As a check of our search methods, we also calculated the number of newspapers in each region as ratio of the population of adolescents within that region. We found that each region contributed approximately the same ratio of newspapers to adolescents. Accordingly, any observed differences among regions could not be accounted for by the distribution of newspapers across regions.

Statistical Analyses

Summary statistics were calculated for the gender, age (median and interquartile range [IQR]), and region of residence of the reported victims and offenders; U.S. Census geographical regions (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West) and types of communities

(urban, suburban/large town, rural/small town) in which the assaults occurred; and the year of the assault. Comparisons of these demographic characteristics and assault characteristics were conducted using Wilcoxon rank-sum test for continuous variables and Pearson's χ^2 test for categorical variables. For some victims (< 5% of the sample), the age was not provided in the newspaper article. We imputed the value of 14 years (the median age of all victims) when no age or age range was reported. The results for comparisons of age by gender were similar when age was not imputed. For all statistical comparisons, $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance was used.

Incidence rates by year for the frequency of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assault stratified by gender were estimated using Poisson regression. Incidence rates by age stratified by gender were estimated in a similar manner. The population of U.S. adolescents by year and gender according to U.S. Census estimates were used in the calculations. Incidence rate ratios (IRRs) comparing the incidence of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assaults by gender and by year were estimated along with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). All analyses were conducted using STATA 11.1.

RESULTS

Number of Newspaper Reports of Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault Among Adolescents

There were 109,180 hits in LexisNexis using 9 combinations of the 6 free-text search terms. Of the 109,180 hits, 98,743 (90.4%) were articles not relevant to this study. These included articles about the general topic of sexual assault, Internet “sting” operations, and resources for sexual assault victims. The 10,437 (9.6%) remaining relevant articles included reports of sexual assault against adolescents initiated through the Internet or telephone chat lines. Many of the relevant articles were duplications of the same article or were articles about the same victim. From the 10,437 relevant articles, there were 812 newspaper-reported unique victims of Internet-initiated adolescent sexual assault from the United States from 1996 to 2007.

Newspaper-Reported Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault Victim Characteristics

Of the 812 U.S. adolescent sexual assault victims identified in newspaper reports, 79.2% were female. The median age among females and among males was 14 years (IQR 13–15 years). Most victims lived in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the United States, and the vast majority was assaulted by a male offender (see Table 1). Most of the reported assaults occurred in the Midwest and Northeast regions of the United States and in urban or small town or rural areas. Most victims (94%) were assaulted in the region of the United States in which they lived. The distribution of age, victim region of residence, region where assault occurred, and type of community in which the assault occurred were similar between female and male victims, but there were more female offenders of male than female victims (see Table 1).

Newspaper-Reported Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault Offender Demographics

Table 2 provides an accounting of the 746 offenders by gender of the offender. Due to the small number of female offenders, valid statistical comparisons by gender were not possible.

The majority (98.7%) of the 746 offenders were male. The median age was 30 years (IQR 23–38 years) for the male offenders and 27 years (IQR 25–33 years) for the female offenders. Most of the offenders lived in the Midwest and Northeast. Only one offender (male) was noted to have male and female victims.

Incidence of Newspaper Reports of Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault Among Adolescents

Figure 1 shows the incidence rates of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents stratified by the victim's gender, and Figure 2 provides the incidence rates by age. Table 3 provides the IRRs by gender comparing the incidence of reported assaults by year and age. There was a near linear increase in the incidence of newspaper-reported assaults for female adolescents (IRR 1.10 [1.08–1.13]), especially from 1996 to 2005, and then some diminution in 2006 and 2007. The reduction in cases may represent an actual trend, or it could be an artifact in reporting of cases, as some newspaper reports of assaults only appeared during or after an offender's trial. Newspaper reports of an arrest typically occurred 1 to 2 years after the arrest. For males, the overall incidence of newspaper-reported assaults was similar across the 12 years (IRR 1.00 [0.96–1.05]). Overall, the incidence of these reported assaults was greater for females compared to males, adjusting for the years of the study (IRR 4.07 [3.43–4.83]). Incidence of assaults was greatest among adolescents aged 13 to 15 years old for both females and males.

DISCUSSION

This investigation offers an accounting of Internet-initiated sexual assault of U.S. adolescents undergoing adjudication as reported in newspapers contained in LexisNexis Academic from 1996 to 2007. Our study findings corroborate findings by Wolak and colleagues (2004, 2009) that most victims are female and that victims are predominately 13 to 15 years old. As expected, incidence rates are highest among these groups. We identified victims from all four U.S. Census geographic regions and observed that assaults occurred in each of the four U.S. Census geographic regions, which indicates that these types of reported assaults are not unique to any particular region of the U.S. Assaults were reported in communities of various sizes, but they were more frequent in urban and suburban or large towns, which is expected given the larger populations in these communities. Also congruent with Wolak and colleagues' studies (2004, 2009), we found that the prototypical offender of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assaults against U.S. adolescents is male and lives in the United States and that at least half of offenders are twice the age of their victims.

Our investigation also provides an approximation of the incidence of assaults that were reported and were undergoing adjudication. The incidence rates indicate that these events fortunately are relatively uncommon—fewer than approximately 50 Internet-initiated sexual assaults per 100,000 adolescents (10- to 17-year-olds) for years 2004 to 2006 were reported in newspapers. In comparison, Wolak and colleagues' (2004) estimate of 88 sexual assaults from 2000 to 2001 reflects an incidence of 52 (95% CI: 42–64) sexual assaults per 100,000 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years old. In contrast, the National Crime Victimization Survey estimates 1.2 per 1,000 adolescents aged 12 to 15 years old (or 120 per 100,000) and 3.2 per 1,000 16- to 19-year-olds (or 320 per 100,000) were survivors of rape/sexual assault in 2005.

Other investigations have found that most sex crimes against minors are not reported to police (Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994), and many do not result in arrest (Finkelhor, Cross, & Cantor, 2005). Regardless, newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assaults among adolescents appear to be much less common than assaults initiated elsewhere.

Despite the relatively uncommon frequency of newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assault among adolescents, the results suggest an increasing incidence of newspaper reports of these events among adolescent females over most of the years of the study, while the incidence among males did not change. Perhaps Internet-initiated sexual assaults truly did increase in frequency over time among female adolescents. On the other hand, given the nature of newspaper reporting and public interest, are these events instead simply being reported more often by the press? We cannot determine that possibility with these data. Corroboration from other data sources is needed. Furthermore, is the incidence of Internet-initiated sexual assault now decreasing? It is unclear if the decreases in incidence in 2006 and 2007 reflect true reductions in these events or are due to oversaturation of reports of the relative novelty (per the press and the public) of these events or to artifacts in delays in reporting of crimes in the press for the latter years of the study. Other novel methods to estimate the occurrence of Internet-initiated sexual assault would be useful to assist with these analyses.

Limitations

The frequency of Internet-initiated sexual assault against adolescents is likely underestimated in this study. Cases of Internet-initiated sexual assault were included in the study only if the offender was charged with or convicted of committing an assault and the charge was reported in a newspaper in the LexisNexis database. As a result, sexual assaults not reported to authorities, cases not reported by the media, absence of details of Internet-initiated events in newspaper articles, reports of cases in newspapers that are not included in LexisNexis Academic, and cases in which the offender was not charged are not accounted for in our estimates. However, because there are no national databases that contain these cases, this study uses one of the only available methods to obtain these national estimates. It is possible that cases that were reported in newspapers differed from cases that were not reported and/or an increased public awareness of this phenomenon influenced the incidence of reports of these assaults. The information provided by this study is also limited to the details reported in the newspaper articles. We are unable to do complete statistical analyses or analyze other characteristics of Internet-initiated adolescent sexual assaults (e.g., method of online contact, concurrent substance use) because details were not uniformly reported.

Conclusion

Newspaper reports of Internet-initiated sexual assault undergoing adjudication increased among U.S. adolescent females from 1996 to 2007, but remained stable for males. Offenders are almost always males and are on average twice the age of their victims. Newspaper-reported Internet-initiated sexual assaults against adolescents occur in all U.S. geographical regions and in communities of diverse sizes. These estimates hopefully will assist in a greater understanding of the nature of these events, aid in interventions to decrease their

occurrence, and guide effective policymaking reducing all types of sexual assault among adolescents.

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FIGURE 1.
Incidence rates of newspaper-reported adjudicated Internet-initiated sexual assault (color figure available online).

FIGURE 2.

Incidence rates of newspaper-reported adjudicated Internet-initiated sexual assault by age and gender (color figure available online).

TABLE 1

Victim Characteristics

	Female <i>n</i> = 643 %	Male <i>n</i> = 169 %	<i>p</i> -value ^a
Victim's age (in years) ^b			<i>p</i> < 0.06
10	0.0	0.6	
11	1.5	0.0	
12	7.3	4.7	
13	19.9	18.9	
14	33.6	34.3	
15	26.3	24.3	
16	7.2	13.6	
17	4.2	3.6	
Victim's region of residence			0.60
Midwest	27.4	31.4	
Northeast	31.7	33.1	
South	19.9	16.0	
West	20.5	19.5	
Not specified	0.5	0.0	
Offender's gender			0.01
Male	99.4	94.8	
Female	0.6	5.2	
Region where assault occurred			0.95
Midwest	27.0	27.8	
Northeast	31.4	33.1	
South	19.9	17.8	
West	21.5	21.3	
Not specified	0.2	0.0	
Community where assault occurred			0.07
Urban	33.4	37.9	
Suburban or large town	37.2	35.5	
Small town or rural	22.3	15.4	
Multiple locations	4.5	8.9	
Not specified	2.6	2.3	

^a *p*-values reflect comparison of demographic characteristics by gender.

^b *p*-value for victim age reflects imputed values.

TABLE 2

Offender Characteristics

	Male <i>n</i> = 736 %	Female <i>n</i> = 10 %
Offender's age (in years)		
17	0.6	0.0
18–24	30.7	20.0
25–29	18.2	40.0
30–34	14.4	20.0
35–39	13.9	10.0
40–44	8.8	10.0
45–49	6.5	0.0
50	6.4	0.0
Not specified	0.5	0.0
Offender's region of residence		
Midwest	26.5	20.0
Northeast	31.5	30.0
South	20.9	40.0
West	20.5	10.0
Not specified	0.5	0.0
Gender of victim(s)		
Female	80.9	30.0
Male	19.4	70.0
Female and male	0.2	0.0

TABLE 3

Incidence Rate Ratios of Newspaper-Reported Adjudicated Internet-Initiated Sexual Assault by Year and Age (in Years), Stratified by Gender

Year	Female IRR (95% CI)	Male IRR (95% CI)
1996	Reference	Reference
1997	3.62 (1.46–8.92)	2.76 (0.99–7.67)
1998	5.02 (2.10–12.04)	2.72 (0.98–7.56)
1999	7.84 (3.36–18.29)	3.26 (1.20–8.84)
2000	6.39 (2.67–14.85)	2.64 (0.95–7.35)
2001	8.85 (3.82–20.52)	3.29 (1.22–8.87)
2002	10.91 (4.75–25.10)	1.64 (0.55–4.88)
2003	11.15 (4.85–25.62)	2.35 (0.84–6.60)
2004	12.73 (5.56–29.13)	3.27 (1.22–8.83)
2005	12.82 (5.60–29.33)	5.44 (2.11–14.02)
2006	12.20 (5.32–27.97)	2.35 (0.84–6.60)
2007	5.88 (2.49–13.90)	0.18 (0.02–1.55)
Age		
10	Reference	Reference
11	1.01 (0.06–16.13)	1.01 (0.06–16.16)
12	4.03 (0.45–36.03)	1.01 (0.06–16.14)
13	10.00 (1.28–78.15)	2.01 (0.18–22.12)
14	17.03 (2.26–127.96)	4.00 (0.45–35.82)
15	13.01 (1.70–99.42)	3.00 (0.31–28.76)
16	4.04 (0.45–36.10)	2.00 (0.18–22.05)
17	2.02 (0.18–22.23)	0.99 (0.06–15.89)