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Testimony of

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Online Sex Crimes against Juveniles:
Myth and Reality

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Whenever any new threats appear on the scene, from SARS to school shooters, it is so crucial to characterize them accurately and as soon as possible, because first impressions are lasting impressions, and it is hard to change them later. We need such accurate and early characterizations to get people to be focused on the right things to do to prevent the spread of the danger.

Now in the case of Internet sex crimes against children, I'm afraid we may already be off to a poor start. The public impression of this crime is not in sync with the reality of this crime based on what we now know from the research, the reality that I think needs to guide our public education.

The public impression about this crime is that we have "Internet pedophiles", who have moved from the playgrounds into your living room through your Internet service, who target **young** children by pretending to be other children, who lie about their ages, identities and motives, who trick the children into providing personal information like their names and addresses, or who harvest it from MySpace; and then armed with this information, these criminals stalk the children, abduct them, rape them or worse.

But our research suggests a different reality. Here's what we have found based on hundreds of cases retrieved from national surveys of law enforcement agencies, and two large national interview studies of youth Internet users themselves, all this research is available now in articles in prominent medical and scientific journals.

First, we have found that the predominant online sex crime victims are not young children, but rather teenagers. And the predominant crime scenario does not involve violent stranger molesters posing online as other children in order to set up an abduction and an assault. Only 5% of the online sex crimes against children involved violence when meetings occurred, only 3% entailed an abduction.

Nor is deception a major factor. Only 5% of offenders truly concealed the fact that they were adults from their victims and 80% by contrast were quite explicit about their sexual intentions towards these kids in their interactions with them.

These are not mostly violent sex crimes but rather criminal seductions that take advantage of common teenage vulnerabilities. The offenders lure teens to meet them for sexual encounters after weeks of very often quite explicit online conversations that play on the teen's desires for romance and adventure and sexual information and understanding. These teens are often troubled youth with histories of family turmoil and physical and sexual abuse as well.

Jenna was a computer-savvy 13 year old, from a divorced family who frequented sex-oriented chat rooms under the screen name "evil_girl." There she meets a 45 year old, Dave. He flatters her, gives her gifts, jewelry, talks about intimate things and drives across several states to meet her for sex on several occasions in motel rooms. When Dave is arrested with her, Jenna resists cooperating with police.

Many of the Internet sex crimes have commonalities with this case. In 73% of these crimes, the youth go to meet the offender on multiple occasions, for multiple sexual encounters. Half the victims were described by police investigators as being in love with or feeling close friendship with the offender. In a quarter of the cases the victim actually ran away from home to be with the offender. These are aspects of Internet crimes against youth that haven't been fully incorporated into our thinking.

They have lots of implications for prevention. For one thing, we think it means that we need to make sure our messages are directed at teens, in language and format and from sources they relate to. Teens themselves, not primarily parents. Many of these teens may be under limited parental influence.

We also have to go beyond blanket warnings about not giving out personal information. Our research with youth suggests that giving out personal information is not what puts kids at risk. Nor does having a blog or a personal web site or frequenting My Space. What puts kids in danger for these crimes is being willing to talk about sex online with strangers, and having a pattern of multiple risky activities on the web -- like going to sex sites and chat rooms, and interacting with lots of people there. It's kids who move toward rather than away from the first signs of danger.

So to prevent these crimes, we have to take on more awkward and complicated topics and start with an acceptance of the fact that some teens are curious about sex and looking for romance and adventure online. We need to talk to them frankly about the risky things they might be contemplating – about why hooking up with a 32 year old has major drawbacks, you know, like jail, bad press, public embarrassment ; and why they should be discouraging, not patronizing, sites and people who are doing offensive things online, fascinating as they may seem.

We also need to make it easier for teens to report the come-ons and the sexual picture requests, and we need to empower by-standers to take action – that is, the friends and the online observers in chat rooms, who may see this happening but today do little to stop it.

We need to task agencies that know about prevention, like CDC and OJJDP and NCMEC, to help design scientifically grounded prevention programs that address these issues and that can then be disseminated to educate youth based on their proven effectiveness. We shouldn't just tell people to do prevention without providing solid guidelines about what really works. And unfortunately, I am not sure we that we know yet what really works

We need training for law enforcement, so they know how to handle these cases and the often reluctant kids whom they need as witnesses to prosecute the offenders.

We also need training for school officials and mental health professionals, so they, too, can help some of these at risk kids before they get into trouble.

And then we need ongoing research to keep tabs on what kids are experiencing and what law enforcement is encountering, because in this rapidly changing technological environment the threats and dangers can morph so very quickly. We have to stay on top of them. We don't want to be responding to yesterday's problem. We don't want to be over-generalizing from one single, high profile incident. So for example, I think we need an annual assessment of threats to kids in the Internet environment, something like the annual Monitoring the Future national survey about drug usage.

The prevention challenges here are not easy. Like discouraging kids from smoking or drinking, the simple scare tactics often don't work. This challenge too may require very deft maneuvering within the teenage psychology to get the message to stick. And in the meantime, we need to be cautious about promoting messages that turn teens off or that betray a completely unrealistic take on the Internet and which may only make them less receptive to the authoritative sources that we want them ultimately to trust on these issues. We shouldn't allow a sense of crisis to mobilize us into misguided crusades.

So we have to do our homework. We have to do our research. So much of what happens online is so hidden. But if we want to stop these internet crimes, we have to understand the details of what is going on. It is as simple and as complicated as that.