



1 in 7 Youth: The Statistics about Online Sexual Solicitations

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Are 1 in 7 youth threatened by “online predators”?

Articles about online dangers frequently cite statistics from a 2005 University of New Hampshire study that 13% of youth were sexually solicited by online predators. (This statistic is sometimes referenced as coming from the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children, which funded and published the study).

As the authors of the research upon which these numbers are based, we believe these statistics often have been misunderstood. The following points are important caveats that those using or quoting this statistic need to understand in order to avoid further confusion.

1) These solicitations did not necessarily come from “online predators”. They were all unwanted online requests to youth to talk about sex, answer personal questions about sex or do something sexual. But many could have been from other youth. In most cases, youth did not actually know the ages of solicitors. When they believed they knew, they said about **half** were other youth.

2) These solicitations were not necessarily devious or intended to lure. Most were limited to brief online comments or questions in chatrooms or instant messages. Many were simply rude, vulgar comments like, “What’s your bra size?”.

3) Most recipients did not view the solicitations as serious or threatening. Two-thirds were not frightened or upset by what happened.

4) Almost all youth handled unwanted solicitations easily and effectively. Most reacted by blocking or ignoring solicitors, leaving sites, or telling solicitors to stop.



5) Extremely few youth (only 2) were actually sexually victimized by someone they met online. This number was too small to be the basis of a reliable estimate of how many youth in the population get sexually victimized from online meetings.

Nonetheless, we were able to make estimates in the study of some of the more serious types of sexual solicitations. **We prefer citing the statistics about these as more representative of threatening or dangerous situations that youth encounter online.**

- 1 in 25 youth (about 4%) got “aggressive” sexual solicitations that included attempts to contact the youth offline. These are the episodes most likely to result in actual victimizations. (About one-quarter of these aggressive solicitations came from people the youth knew in person, mostly other youth.)
- 1 in 25 youth (about 4%) were solicited to take sexual pictures of themselves. In many jurisdictions, these constitute criminal requests to produce child pornography.
- 1 in 25 youth (about 4%) said they were upset or distressed as a result of an online solicitation. Whether or not the solicitors were online predators, these are the youth most immediately harmed by the solicitations themselves.

We encourage writers and speakers to cite these other estimates as well as mentioning the caveats about the “one in seven” figure.

Reports and papers about this study, information about other research we have done, and contact information for the authors are available at our website www.unh.edu/ccrc. Please feel free to contact us if you have questions about any of our research.

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