Characteristics of Internet Sex Offenders:
Theory, Updated Research, and Future Directions

Symposium Chair: Ian A. Elliott, Ph.D.

Over the past two decades there has been a concerted effort to improve our understanding of individuals who use the internet to commit sexual offences. This effort has combined theoretical understanding of the phenomenon with empirical research to examine and test our assumptions about this population. Although there have been considerable advances in recent years, developing our understanding of internet sex offenders continues to be muddied by the inherent difficulties in defining the population and delineating between internet offending behaviors, with many questions remaining unanswered.

For example, much of the prior research is based on an assumption that traditional sex offender theory and its constituent concepts can be applied to the internet offender population. Is there an adequate rationale for this? The issue of offence cross-over continues to be problematic. Many studies have combined individuals who have committed both child pornography and contact offences with those who have solely committed child pornography offences. But are mixed offenders different from those who engage in one type of offending behaviour exclusively? Also, much of the research in this area has focused on those who access child pornography online, whereas those who use the internet to communicate directly with children have received less attention. Are those who solicit minors for 'cybersex'/sexualized communication over the internet different than child pornography offenders?

This symposium aims to bring together a mix of research and theory from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States in order to address some of these questions. In the first presentation, Ian Elliott will examine the applicability of current sex offender theory to the internet sex offender population and highlight outstanding questions. In the second, Kelly Babchishin will present findings from an updated meta-analysis comparing traditional contact sex offenders to different types of online sex offenders. In the third presentation, Juliane Kloess will report findings from a qualitative study of online sexual solicitation offences committed against children, an understudied group.

Applying Sexual Offence Theory to Online Offenders

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This presentation summarizes the conclusions of a recent re-examination of the literature on online sex offenders and the extent to which online sex offender behaviour can be explained by contemporary sex offender theory. Ward and Beech (2006) described the attributes of a good theory. This presentation describes three broad categories of attributes that we can use to assess effective applicability to the online population.

Firstly, it will discuss *predictive accuracy*, *empirical adequacy*, *scope*, and *explanatory depth* - can existing sex offender theory account for existing findings, the range of phenomena requiring explanation, and deep underlying causes and processes, in the internet offender population? Has the initial, and still pervasive, view that internet offenders *ought* to be similar to child molesters made the successful application of sex offender theory a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Secondly, it will discuss *internal coherence* - are there contradictions or logical gaps in sex offender theory when applied to internet offenders? For example, how do we account for the contradiction of an offender presenting with conflicting treatment needs online (e.g., social isolation) and offline (i.e., pedophile networking).

Finally, it will discuss *fertility* and *heuristic value* - do the theories lead to new predictions or open up new avenues of inquiry both for research and intervention? Do we know enough about adult pornography use in the internet offender population? What about offenders whose offences overlap the online and offline world? Where do we intervene, online or offline?

The Characteristics of Internet Sex Offenders: An Updated Meta-Analysis

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R. Karl Hanson, Ph.D.
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This presentation will review the findings of an updated meta-analysis of internet sex offenders. The meta-analysis, based on approximately 30 unique samples, compared the characteristics of child pornography-only offenders, offline-only offenders, mixed offenders (i.e., both online and offline sexual offences), and solicitation offenders.

The findings highlight that these groups are not homogeneous; motivation and opportunity matters. Offenders who commit contact sex offences have greater access to children compared to those who do not commit hands-on offences. In contrast,

internet sex offenders tend to have greater access to the internet compared to contact sex offenders. Compared to traditional sex offenders, online offenders are more likely to have deviant sexual interests; however, online-only offenders are more likely to have psychological barriers that prevent them from acting directly on these interests (e.g., lower victim access, lower antisociality, greater victim empathy).

There were fewer studies on solicitation offenders and most studies sampled contact-driven solicitation offenders. Additional studies on solicitation offenders, especially fantasy-driven solicitation offenders, are needed. In short, this meta-analysis found that some online offenders resemble traditional sex offenders in terms of psychology and sexual activities; others appear to be specialists, with sexual offending behaviours limited to the internet.

Solicitation Offenders:
Behavior and Motivation in Interactions with Victims via Internet Communications

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Recent research on internet sexual offending has typically focused on child pornography and often neglects to consider offence-specific processes, such as sexual grooming. This presentation will report on the process of sexual grooming as part of sexually exploitative interactions between solicitation offenders and their victims on the internet.

Transcripts of chat logs for a number of cases and associated police reports were examined, and analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Findings will be presented according to offenders' diverse motivations and modus operandi. Two previously-identified subtypes of offenders emerged from the analyses, namely contact-driven versus fantasy-driven. Differences in offence processes were apparent depending on offenders' motivation, varying between pursuing the goal of arranging a physical meeting for the purpose of sexual activity (i.e., contact-driven) and engaging in online sexual activity without a particular interest to meet offline (i.e., fantasy-driven). Content from the transcripts will be outlined to highlight some of the most prominent strategies employed and behaviours engaged in by offenders. This includes the types of sexual activities performed, as well as sexual topics initiated and developed as part of their interactions with victims.

Finally, implications of findings will be discussed with regard to forensic evidence recovered from offenders' computers by the police, and how this may inform current understanding of cross-over offences, both in relation to contact offence and other illegal activities online.