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An Exploratory Study of Internet-Initiated Sexual Offenses and the Chat Room Sex Offender: Has the Internet Enabled a New Typology of Sex Offender?

Peter Briggs[1], Walter T. Simon[1], and Stacy Simonsen[1]

Abstract

This exploratory study examined 51 participants convicted of an Internet-initiated sex offense in which they attempted to entice an adolescent into a sexual relationship using an Internet chat room. All participants were convicted of a sex offense and subject to an evaluation as a part of sentencing requirements in Colorado. Clinical and behavioral data were obtained from each subject's offense-specific evaluation and chat room transcripts. The results of the study found that 90% of the participants were apprehended as a result of an Internet sex sting. The authors conclude that Internet chat room sex offenders constitute a separate group characterized by less severe criminogenic factors than other sex offenders (rapists, child molesters). It can be hypothesized that chat room sex offenders avoid relationships and spend a significant amount of time in online chat rooms as a primary social and sexual outlet, and engage in other sexually compulsive behaviors. Within this offender group, it was discovered that two subgroups exist: a contact-driven group motivated to engage in offline sexual behavior with an adolescent and a fantasy-driven group motivated to engage an adolescent in online cybersex without an express intent to meet offline. The chat room sex offender presents a significant clinical issue to treatment providers as a live victim does not exist. Thus, it is unclear if Internet sex stings prevent incidents of child sexual exploitation and may result in convictions of individuals who may never have abused a child. The data suggest a tentative sex offender typology, including subtypes, which need to be replicated in future studies.

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Introduction

Research into sexual offenses involving the Internet is at a rudimentary stage and not well-developed (Hewitt & Sheldon, 2007; O' Brien & Webster, 2007; Sheldon & Hewitt, 2007; Wright, 2009). As opposed to rapists or child molesters, sex offenses on the Internet may not involve visual or physical contact with a victim. Noncontact offending is not a new type of offense (voyeurism, indecent exposure); however, the medium has changed as the offender can locate potential victims online without leaving their residence. The offender will engage in an online process of exploitation, luring, and/or enticement in which he will contact a child, build trust, introduce sexual content with the intention of engaging in offline (or online) sexual activity (Medaris & Girouard, 2002). The offender may believe that he is operating with a degree of anonymity, communicate with several children at once, utilize multiple chat rooms, and profile names. In turn, law enforcement has been concerned with unfettered access and anonymity that the Internet provides to persons who want to exploit youth and their ability to misrepresent themselves (Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000). However, this anonymity has proven to be a valuable tool to law enforcement as police officers may pose online as a child in an attempt to apprehend these offenders as a part of an Internet sex sting, a form of preventative law enforcement practices (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2005; Wright, 2009).

The Internet has provided a new medium and, in effect, created new sex offender groupings that did not exist in the same manner or frequency (Sheldon & Hewitt, 2007). The purpose of this study is to explore and describe adult sex offenders who have utilized Internet chat rooms as a means to engage in sexual behavior with children. Prior studies have described chat room sex offenses from research based on victim and law enforcement data (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Mitchell et al., 2005; Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003; Walsh & Wolak, 2005); however, direct studies on the chat room sex offender are limited and have involved a small number of participants (Malesky, 2007; Marcum, 2007).

Sex Offenses and the Internet

Men who utilize chat rooms to entice children online have been referred to as *pedophiles* by mainstream media sources (Jenkins, 2001; Wolak et al., 2004); however, research does not support that assessment. Sheldon and Hewitt (2007) refer to sex offenders convicted of possession and/or distribution of online child pornography images as pedophiles. These offenders locate images of child pornography, store these images on their computer hard drive, access them at home as a means to satisfy a sexual fantasy

or passive curiosity, and deny ever actually harming a child (Elliott & Beech, 2009; Quayle & Taylor, 2003; Sheldon & Hewitt, 2007; Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007; Wright, 2009). These individuals typically do not utilize chat rooms to communicate with prepubescent children (Wolak et al., 2008). The primary purpose of chat room communication for offenders convicted of child pornography offenses pertains to the child pornography (pedophile) subculture. Jenkins (2001) describes this subculture as organized similarly to other deviant subcultures, with its own mores, rules, and jargon used to justify criminal behavior. It is in this venue that child pornography offenders communicate with each other and share images of child pornography. Clinical data on these offenders are not definitive nor is there a direct link between possession of child pornography and child molestations (Bates & Metcalf, 2007; Hewitt & Sheldon, 2007; Webb et al., 2007). In their phallometric assessment of child pornography offenders, Seto, Cantor, and Blanchard (2006) report clinical findings that determine possession of child pornography is a diagnostic indicator of pedophilia (sexual attraction to pre-pubertal children). A pedophile's direct access to prepubescent victims online is restricted in chat rooms as young children are not as accessible online, are less likely to respond to sexual overtures, and in general are less interested in sex and romance than adolescents due to developmental variables (Wolak et al., 2008). Instead, participation in online web forums provides child pornography offenders with social support, justifications, and strategies to increase security and avoid detection by law enforcement (Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010).

The Chat Room Sex Offender

Walsh & Wolak (2005) describe a distinct sex offender group who utilize live online chat rooms to entice male or female teens into an offline sexual relationship. In contrast to prepubescent children, adolescent vulnerability to this type of enticement stems from developmentally normal characteristics that make them curious about sex, susceptible to attention, easily aroused, and willing to take risks (Berliner, 2002), including their willingness to meet the adult offender face-to-face or travel in his vehicle (Wolak et al., 2004). As opposed to a child pornography offender's predilection for prepubescent children (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Sheldon & Howitt, 2007), the chat room sex offender's victim selection is based on visual maturity and they do not appear to be pedophiles as 99% of the victims in the Wolak et al. (2004) study were between the ages of 13 and 17 years old. Visual maturity may not create a clear distinction between child pornography offenders as Quayle, Holland, Linehan, and Taylor (2000) reference that their subject had obtained "teenage pornography." Furthermore, Mitchell et al. (2005) denote that some apprehended chat room sex offenders were found to possess images of child pornography on their home computers. Therefore, chat room offenses may be more opportunistic in nature as adolescents are more likely to form relationships on the Internet, be asked for a face-to-face meeting, and attend such offline meetings with adult men (Wolak et al., 2003).

In terms of a behavioral description of the chat room sex offender, Criddle (2006) and Malesky (2007) describe "predatory" online behavior of the chat room sex offender as using Internet chat rooms and online profiles to target and exploit victim weakness, as opposed to visual maturity. Marcum (2007) clarifies that these adults initiate online relationships with vulnerable teens and begin a grooming process with the intent to meet offline. The offender may spend many hours attempting to contact multiple adolescent females (or males) in Internet chat rooms, making an accurate analysis of victim history difficult to determine. According to the interviews of convicted chat room sex offenders in Malesky's (2007) study, chat room offenders search online chat rooms and/or read online profiles of potential victims, "cue in" to any minor who mentions sex during a conversation or whose screen name is young or sexually suggestive, and send adult pornography and/or naked pictures of themselves in an effort to normalize sex between adults and children. Offenders in this study did not typically deceive victims about being older men interested in sexual relationships with teens; however, manipulation was apparent and victims were vulnerable (Wolak et al., 2004). Marcum's (2007) findings indicate that offenders' will promise love, marriage, and compassion as a process of manipulation. Malesky (2007) describes the process of grooming as the offender's systematic efforts to locate unsupervised female adolescents struggling with family conflict or parental neglect, establish a friendship, and introduce sexual content in an attempt to convince the adolescent to meet them offline. When a face-to-face meeting does occur, 89% result in sexual intercourse, oral sex, or other forms of penetrative sex (Wolak et al., 2004).

In terms of offender demographics, apprehended offenders are described as mostly White males, median age of 35, educated, employed, and no prior criminal record (Walsh & Wolak, 2005). In their clinical description of the chat room sex offender, Wolak et al. (2008) reference that, as opposed to pedophilia, chat room sex offenders may have hebephilia to denote the nondeviant arousal to pubescent children, or ehebephilia in reference to a sexual compulsion for older adolescents. Wolak et al. (2008) further describe that the paraphilia of exhibitionism may accurately describe the offending behavior because offenders have sent their victims' nude photos and/or used web cameras to transmit nude images of themselves. The most common victim characteristics are willingness to make sexual comments or discuss sexually related issues or topics (Malesky, 2007). In terms of victim impact, Wells & Mitchell's (2007) report on Internet youth exploitation describe that victims are significantly more likely to have both a current and lifetime diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder. Other victim co-occurring mental health issues were depression, anxiety or phobias, and suicidal ideation or attempts.

Police agencies have responded to this social problem initiating proactive undercover investigations. Specialized investigators pose as minors online, engage in online sexual conversation, agree to an offline meeting, and are able to capture offenders. A take-over investigation ensues when a solicited adolescent or an informed parent report a solicitation to the police. In turn, the police pose as the solicited minor (Mitchell et al., 2005). Offenders convicted of an enticement charge related to an Internet sex sting must

register as a sex offender and may be subject to mandatory minimum sentences (Wright, 2009). Mitchell et al. (2005) describe this group of Internet sting offenders as "older, from a higher socio-economic status, more likely to be employed full-time, have less adult-related deviant behavior, less known violence, and fewer arrests for sexual and non-sexual offending" (p. 260).

Method

Participants Studied

Using a convenience sample of participants, this study gathered behavioral, demographic, clinical, and social data from cases of Internet-initiated sexual offenses resulting in arrest, conviction, and a court-ordered offense-specific mental health evaluation. Participants were referred to a forensic mental health center with a specialization of working with sex offenders. Archival data from client files were gathered from participants convicted in Colorado from 2003 to 2009. A sample of 51 convicted chat room sex offenders were located from available files. In terms of the subject referral process, probation officers may refer each offender convicted of a chat room sex offense to a forensic mental health practice at their discretion. This agency is one of several agencies in Colorado with a similar forensic specialty; thus, only a portion of chat room sex offenders in Colorado are evaluated by this agency, due to probation officers' preferences. In this forensic mental health practice, the chat room sex offender is a significant minority of referred clients. Most offenders would be classified as child molesters, rapists, or offenders with a paraphilia; however, this Internet population appears to be increasing as law enforcement becomes more sophisticated. As participants were referred for evaluation and/or treatment services, some participants were evaluated by a different agency if the participant was referred for treatment services only. Consistency across evaluators is enhanced because the Colorado Sex Offender Management Board (SOMB) mandates specific requirements of evaluations to include the following: an assessment of intellectual functioning, mental health (multiaxial assessment), medical/psychiatric health, drug and alcohol use, stability of functioning, developmental history, sexual evaluation, risk assessment (recidivism), motivation and amenability to treatment, and impact on the victim (SOMB, 2004). Diagnostic assessments were composed of the Millon Clinical Multi-Axial Inventory III (MCMI-III), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-2), and/or review of collateral information from police investigations. Also included were assessments of empathy, cognitive distortions, sexual fantasies, and sexual addiction. Additional data sources were available for some study participants including specific incident and/or sex history polygraphs to assess a participant's truthfulness regarding the offense and/or their sexual history. Study participants' offense specific evaluations contained the results of phallometric assessments in which each participant's sexual arousal/interest was assessed utilizing the penile plethysmograph and/or VRT assessment. Deviant arousal/ interests was determined based on an increase in penile tumescence to deviant stimuli

(sexual arousal to child stimuli) or visual response time on the Abel Assessment of Sexual Interests™ (AASI-2). Included in each participant's chart was a portion of the chat room dialog between the participant and decoy victim providing documentation on all Internet sex stings. Review of chat room dialog revealed patterns of communication and behavior; variables were created to describe these patterns.

Analyses

This study used descriptive statistics and frequencies to describe the characteristics of the participants and to a limited degree, the victims. Variables were created based on detailed analysis of the chat room dialogs. Demographics, social, and clinical variables were obtained directly from evaluations in similar format as presented in the reports. Cross-tabulation statistics were utilized to compare and contrast findings between groups.

Results

Offender Descriptions

Regarding chat room sex offender demographics, results were similar to Walsh & Wolak (2005) and Mitchell et al. (2005) in terms of education, employment, and criminal history (see Table 1). Offender professions reflected their level of education, encompassing health care, business, computer technology, journalism, carpentry, food service, and education. One participant was in the military at the time of his arrest, and one participant was attending college in Nebraska. Two subjects worked at a public school in an apparent position of trust with children (girl's soccer coach, teacher's aide). Concerning prior criminal behavior, most offenders presented with prosocial histories as 94% were facing their first felony arrest and experience with the criminal justice system.

Offender Apprehension by Law Enforcement

In terms of participants' apprehension by law enforcement, a disproportionate number were apprehended as a result of an Internet sex sting (see Table 2). These proactive investigations resulted in the apprehension of 90% of the participants in this study, as opposed to 25% reported in the study by Mitchell et al. (2005). Internet sex stings were conducted by undercover police officers posing as a teenage female (or male) in an Internet chat room. Participants engaged the police officer (decoy victim) in sexually explicit chat (solicitation), sought to meet them in person (aggressive solicitation), and/or engaged in online cybersex. Participants apparently believed that they were communicating with an actual teen, although some suspected that their victim was a police officer and asked the decoy victim if they were in fact a police officer or "undercover girl." Two participants were apprehended as a result of a take-over investigation

Table 1. Chat Room Offender Description

Offender characteristic	Total sample (N = 51)		Contact-driven (N = 30)		Fantasy-driven (N = 21)	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Age of offender	19-54	31.45 (8.72)	19-52	29.93 (7.96)	22-54	33.62 (9.47)
Age of victim	12-16	13.82 (0.59)	13-16	13.93 (0.58)	12-14	13.67 (0.58)
Difference in age	5-40	17.51 (8.68)	5-38	16.07 (7.89)	6-40	19.75 (9.52)
Years of formal education	10-22	14.33 (2.24)	10-22	13.33 (1.88)	11-22	14.33 (2.60)
Days of online relationship meeting or arrest	1-180	19.71 (42.60)	1-160	10.47 (28.99)	1-180	32.90 (54.87)
Offender age range						
19 to 29 years		24 (47.1%)		15 (50.0%)		9 (42.9%)
30 to 39 years		16 (31.4%)		12 (40.0%)		4 (19.0%)
40 to 49 years		9 (17.6%)		2 (6.7%)		7 (33.3%)
50 to 59 years		2 (3.9%)		1 (3.3%)		1 (4.8%)
Victim age range						
12		1 (2.0%)		0 (0%)		1 (4.8%)
13		10 (19.6%)		5 (16.7%)		5 (23.8%)
14		28 (74.5%)		23 (76.7%)		15 (71.4%)
15		1 (2.0%)		1 (3.3%)		0 (0.0%)
16		1 (2.0%)		1 (3.3%)		0 (0.0%)
Gender of offender						
Male		51 (100%)		30 (100%)		21 (100%)
Female		0 (0%)		0 (0%)		0 (0%)
Gender of victim						
Female		50 (98%)		29 (96.7%)		21 (100.0%)
Male		1 (2.0%)		1 (3.3%)		0 (0.0%)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Offender characteristic	Total sample (N = 51)		Contact-driven (N = 30)		Fantasy-driven (N = 21)	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Race of offender						
White		40 (78.4%)		21 (70.0%)		19 (90.5%)
Latino		8 (15.7%)		6 (20.0%)		2 (9.5%)
African American		1 (2.0%)		1 (3.3%)		0 (0.0%)
Other		2 (3.9%)		2 (6.6%)		0 (0.0%)
Marital status at time of arrest						
Single, never married		27 (52.9%)		19 (63.3%)		8 (38.1%)
Married		13 (25.5%)		5 (16.7%)		8 (38.1%)
Separated/divorced		11 (21.6%)		6 (20.0%)		5 (23.8%)
Offender has children		18 (35.3%)		9 (30.0%)		9 (42.9%)
Highest level of completed education						
Not a high school graduate		4 (7.8%)		3 (10.0%)		1 (4.8%)
High school graduate or GED		16 (31.4%)		9 (30.0%)		7 (33.3%)
Some college education		19 (37.3%)		12 (40%)		7 (33.3%)
Completed associate degree		5 (9.8%)		4 (13.4%)		1 (4.8%)
Completed bachelor degree		4 (7.8%)		1 (3.3%)		3 (14.3%)
Completed a graduate degree		3 (5.9%)		1 (3.3%)		2 (9.5%)
Offenders employment status						
Employed full-time		44 (86.3%)		24 (80.0%)		20 (95.2%)
Employed part-time		1 (2.0%)		1 (3.3%)		0 (0.0%)
Unemployed		6 (11.8%)		5 (16.7%)		1 (4.8%)
Prior felony convictions		3 (5.9%)		2 (6.7%)		1 (4.8%)
Prior sex offense convictions		2 (3.9%)		1 (3.3%)		1 (4.8%)

79

Table 2. How Offenders Were Apprehended by Law Enforcement

Law enforcement case characteristic	Total sample (N = 51)	Contact-driven (N = 30)	Fantasy-driven (N = 21)
Method of undercover police investigation			
Proactive investigation	45 (88.2%)	24 (80.0%)	21 (100.0%)
Take-over investigation	2 (3.9%)	2 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Reactive (contact offense)	4 (7.8%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Method of offender apprehension			
Arrested at meeting place	22 (43.1%)	19 (63.3%)	3 (14.3%)
Arrested prior to meeting	3 (5.9%)	3 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Online arrest (Police ruse)	18 (35.3%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (85.7%)
No show at meeting place	4 (7.8%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Contact sex offense	4 (7.8%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)

(Mitchell et al., 2005) in which the offender attempted to solicit a female adolescent who informed the police initiating a similar proactive investigation, in essence taking over as if the undercover police officer was the solicited adolescent. The remaining participants located adolescent females on the Internet, resulting in a contact sex offense (7.8%). Victims of these offenses did not report any forced sexual assaults; however, one victim felt betrayed when she learned that the offender had lied about his age. That participant's omission was consistent with participants described in the Wolak et al. (2008) study in that he claimed that he was 25 years old when in fact he was 35 years old.

Participants' arrest method was not consistent; most participants communicated with a police officer and were arrested at the designated meeting place or apprehended beforehand at their home or place of employment. This led to the finding that an adult engaging a female teen, or someone he believed to be a female teen, in sexually explicit chat constitutes enticement. In a minority of participants, a distinct pattern emerged: 35.3% of the participants engaged in a variety of online sexual behaviors with their victim, which included sexually explicit chat, masturbation projected on web camera, and/or a pattern of cybersex similar to exhibitionism. These behaviors encompassed the entirety of the participant's sexual offense as the participant's sexual climax (and illegal behaviors) occurred during cybersex. Cybersex of this type has been described by Finkelhor et al. (2000) as ". . . a form of fantasy sex, which involves interactive chat-room sessions where the participants describe sexual acts and sometimes disrobe and masturbate" (p. 3). These cases involved multiple sessions of cybersex and, in most cases, if a meeting was attempted it was to purchase material (high-heel shoes, web camera) ostensibly to improve future cybersex interactions.

When monitoring online chat rooms, police officers must create an online profile that offenders will contact via sexual solicitations. Consistent with Malesky's (2007) study, police officer profiles appear young and sexually suggestive (spicey_chick_93, newmexico_cutie2003, lil_kitty1414, and Ohsillykelli); thus police officers create

profiles that attract sexual solicitations from sex offenders. In terms of the participants' profiles, three appear sexually explicit (denvernudist, kingkinky, singleandreadytomingle69); however, most profiles include the participant's name, initials, occupation (firefighter), or an activity (wpskibum, benzdriver). To ascribe any significant interpretation from participants' profile names would be speculative; however, a profile that includes all or part of a participant's name reveals that participants made no attempt to disguise their identity.

Mental Health

A significant majority of participants presented with mental health and/or personality disturbances according to the multiaxial diagnoses and clinical formulations (see Table 3). Concerning mental health diagnoses, approximately 75% were assessed as having at least one Axis I diagnosis, with 25% having a comorbid condition. Most common Axis I diagnoses were depression, adjustment disorder, and substance use disorders. Sexual disorders were of particular interest; however, only 10% were diagnosed with a specific paraphilia and no participants were diagnosed with pedophilia or hebephilia. A potential confounding variable concerning mental health diagnosis may exist in that each offender's life was negatively affected due to their arrest and involvement in the criminal justice system prior to the evaluation. Arrest, incarceration, marital disruption, job loss, and media reports of high-profile arrests may impact mental status examinations and responses to diagnostic assessments. In effect, participants' diagnoses may describe present functioning but not their preoffense functioning. In regard to Axis II (personality disorders), approximately 50% of participants were assessed as having a personality disorder, with avoidant personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder as most common. Reflecting the participants' absence of criminality in their history, antisocial personality disorder was uncommon.

Sexual evaluations were of special interest including results of phallometric assessments, current sexual behaviors, and lifetime sexual behaviors at the time of each participant's arrest (see Table 4). Participants' phallometric assessments revealed that chat room sex offenders, as a group, do not present with deviant sexual arousal or interests. Consistent with Seto et al.'s (2006) assessment of deviant sexual interests based on an offenders' possession of child pornography, two participants' computers contained evidence of online child pornography and one subject possessed deviant material titled "how to solicit minors online." Of the two participants who possessed child pornography, one responded to deviant stimuli on the penile plethysmograph. In terms of child pornography production, one offender who engaged in a sexual relationship with a teen female possessed her nude photos on his cellular phone; he denied sharing or posting them on the Internet. Consistent with the Wolak et al. (2008) study, chat room sex offenders in this study presented with clinical issues of sexual compulsivity. Participants described sexual preoccupations including compulsive pornography use, chat room solicitation, one-night stands, group sex, and solicitation of prostitutes. Participants' weekly masturbation habits were high, with an average of 4.76 times and a range of 1 to 21 times per week. Sexual compulsivity will be further analyzed in the discussion section of this article.

Table 3. Results of Mental Health Evaluations

Mental health characteristics	Total sample (N = 51)	Contact-driven (N = 30)	Fantasy-driven (N = 21)
Axis I diagnosis	38 (74.5%)	22 (73.3%)	16 (76.2%)
Comorbid diagnosis	13 (25.5%)	5 (16.7%)	8 (38.1%)
Axis I diagnosis category			
Depressive disorder	17 (33.3%)	10 (33.3%)	7 (33.3%)
No diagnosis	13 (25.5%)	8 (26.7%)	5 (23.8%)
Adjustment disorder	13 (25.5%)	7 (23.3%)	6 (28.6%)
Substance use disorder	7 (13.7%)	4 (13.3%)	3 (14.3%)
Anxiety disorder	4 (7.8%)	3 (14.3%)	1 (4.8%)
Bipolar disorder	4 (7.8%)	2 (6.7%)	2 (9.5%)
Paraphilia	5 (9.8%)	1 (3.2%)	4 (19.0%)
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	1 (2.0%)	1 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Posttraumatic stress disorder	1 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.8%)
Axis II disorder diagnosis	28 (54.9%)	17 (56.7%)	11 (52.4%)
Axis II diagnosis category			
None	23 (45.1%)	13 (43.3%)	10 (47.6%)
Avoidant personality disorder	13 (25.5%)	9 (30.0%)	4 (13.3%)
Narcissistic personality disorder	7 (13.7%)	2 (6.7%)	5 (23.8%)
Dependent personality disorder	3 (5.9%)	2 (6.7%)	1 (4.8%)
Borderline personality disorder	3 (5.9%)	1 (3.3%)	2 (9.5%)
Antisocial personality disorder	3 (5.9%)	3 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Childhood trauma			
Experienced sexual abuse	6 (11.8%)	4 (13.3%)	2 (9.5%)
Experienced physical abuse	9 (17.6%)	6 (20.0%)	3 (14.3%)
Witnessed domestic violence	12 (23.5%)	9 (30.0%)	3 (14.3%)

Chat Room Offending Behavioral Analysis

Participants' chat room transcripts and associated behaviors suggested two distinct behavioral patterns within the chat room sex offender grouping. In terms of behavioral commonalities among participants, all used Internet chat rooms (Yahoo, AOL, MSN, or Myspace) to locate someone they believed to be a teenager, initiated contact, introduced sexual content, and acknowledged the age of the victim during conversations (see Table 5). All of the participants engaged their victims in a form of sexually explicit chat. In addition to sexually explicit chat, 68.6% sent their victim nude photos of themselves (penis exposed), 41.2% masturbated at least once during their communication, and 29.4% attempted to teach their victim to masturbate. A minority engaged their victim in what they believed to be mutual cybersex. During these cybersex interactions, some participants projected a naked image of themselves in a live sex act (e.g., masturbation, cross-dressing, bathing, and sex with a woman) similar to exhibitionism.

Table 4. Results of Sexual Evaluation and Behavior Inventory

Sexual characteristics	Total sample (N = 51)		Contact-driven (N = 30)		Fantasy-driven (N = 21)	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Total sex partners (lifetime)	0-100	17.0 (23.12)	0-100	14.63 (21.31)	1-100	19.80 (25.87)
Age offender first viewed print pornography	4-26	14.74 (4.15)	4-25	15.21 (4.89)	10-22	14.15 (2.83)
Age offender first viewed Internet pornography	12-44	22.43 (7.57)	14-44	21.28 (6.39)	12-40	23.65 (8.82)
Age offender first masturbated	7-25	14.25 (2.97)	10-25	15.10 (2.93)	7-20	13.10 (2.67)
Age offender first had sexual intercourse	12-32	18.15 (3.80)	12-28	18.14 (3.54)	14-32	18.10 (4.23)
Masturbation frequency (per week)	1-21	4.76 (5.67)	1-21	4.10 (5.60)	1-21	5.48 (5.80)
Deviant arousal responses on plethysmography						
Penile plethysmograph		2 (9.0%)		1 (7.7%)		1 (11.1%)
Abel assessment of sexual interests ™		3 (9.4%)		2 (11.8%)		1 (6.7%)
Offender possessed online child pornography		2 (3.9%)		1 (3.3%)		1 (4.8%)
Assessed to be high risk to community		3 (5.9%)		2 (6.7%)		1 (4.8%)
Offender in full denial of online behavior		1 (2.0%)		0 (0%)		1 (4.8%)
Offender has viewed online pornography		48 (94.1%)		28 (93.1%)		20 (95.3%)
Offender has solicited adults for offline sex		25 (49.0%)		15 (50%)		10 (47.6%)
Offender has engaged in one-night stand initiated online		24 (47.1%)		15 (50%)		9 (42.9%)
Offender has had sex with prostitutes		9 (17.6%)		4 (13.3%)		5 (23.8%)
One-night stand (not initiated on Internet)		24 (47.0%)		15 (50%)		9 (42.9%)

Note: Participants submitted to either the penile plethysmograph (n = 22) or Abel assessment of sexual interests™ (n = 32) except for 3 participants who submitted to both assessments.

83

Table 5. Chat Room Behavior Descriptions

Chat room behaviors	Total sample (N = 51)	Contact-driven (N = 30)	Fantasy-driven (N = 21)
Online meeting place			
Online chat room (live)	49 (96.1%)	28 (93.3%)	21 (100.0%)
MySpace (offline messages)	2 (3.9%)	2 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)
Confirmed victim's age (during chat)	51 (100.0%)	30 (100.0%)	21 (100.0%)
Sexually explicit conversations (chat) initiated by offender	51 (100.0%)	30 (100.0%)	21 (100.0%)
Sent victim nude photos (of self)	35 (68.6%)	18 (60%)	17 (81.0%)
Subject masturbated during chat	21 (41.2%)	5 (16.7%)	16 (76.2%)
Encouraged victim to masturbate during chat	15 (29.4%)	2 (16.7%)	13 (61.9%)
Engaged victim in cybersex	19 (37.3%)	2 (6.7%)	17 (81.0%)
Attempted to teach victim sexual behaviors	18 (35.3%)	4 (13.3%)	16 (66.7%)
Offender lied about his age	9 (17.6%)	6 (20.0%)	3 (14.3%)
Inquired if victim was a police officer	19 (37.3%)	11 (36.7%)	8 (38.1%)
Asked victim to keep relationship secret	30 (58.8%)	19 (63.3%)	11 (52.4%)
Offered to pay for sex	4 (7.8%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Scheduled face-to-face meeting	31 (60.8%)	28 (93.3%)	3 (14.3%)
Attempted to meet victim	27 (52.9%)	24 (80.0%)	3 (14.3%)
Contact sex offense	4 (7.8%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Exhibitionism on web camera (projected to victim)	16 (31.3%)	2 (6.7%)	14 (66.7%)
Sent victim online pornography	2 (3.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (13.3%)
Relationship duration prior to meeting or arrest (days)			
Less than 24 hr	21 (41.2%)	14 (46.4%)	7 (33.3%)
Less than 1 week	13 (25.5%)	7 (23.3%)	6 (28.6%)
Less than 1 month	10 (19.6%)	8 (26.4%)	2 (9.5%)
Less than 3 months	3 (5.9%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (14.3%)
Greater than 3 months	4 (7.8%)	1 (3.3%)	3 (14.3%)

One subject engaged in similar fantasy-type behaviors during what he believed to be mutual telephone sex. Participants were aware that Internet sex stings exist, asked their victim if they were a police officer, and specifically asked their victim to keep their sexual exploits secret. The duration of the online "relationship" varied (time between first contact and face-to-face meeting and/or arrest), with a range between 1 and 180 days, an average of 19.71 days. The duration of the relationship between the offender and victim was impacted by several variables including the offender's motivation to meet the victim for a sexual encounter or engage in a more protracted relationship that included multiple sessions of cybersex. The relationship duration was also affected by police officers' proactive investigation capabilities and efforts to apprehend

the offender based on a specific meeting place or personal information exchanged during Internet conversations (name, address, phone number, picture, or webcam images). As a result these data are highly skewed; therefore, the median value of the relationship duration between offender and victim may be a more descriptive value. The median value for the relationship duration was 3 days of communications prior to an attempted meeting or arrest.

Subject Classification System

Review of behavioral data resulted in the discovery of two distinct behavioral groups of chat room sex offenders. A contact-driven group was motivated to set up an offline meeting to engage in a physical sexual relationship. Sexually explicit chat and online sexual behaviors were an attempt to groom the victim to leave her home and meet offline. Participants persisted as long as is necessary to set up an offline meeting. The contact-driven group sought to have sexual climax during the offline meeting. Participants were classified as contact-driven if they scheduled a specific meeting time/place and agreed to meet at that location. This group included the participants who attempted to meet their victims or were arrested prior to the specified meeting time. Participants who engaged in a sexual relationship with a teen female (contact offense) were also included in this group. The fantasy-driven group engaged in a variety of online sexual behaviors with the victim, including cybersex and exhibitionism projected to the victim using a web camera. The motivation was for the sexual climax to occur during online cybersex, as opposed to an offline encounter. Participants were classified as fantasy-driven if they engaged their victims in mutual masturbation, cybersex, and/or exhibitionism with climax occurring during cybersex (or phone sex). Three fantasy-driven offenders were arrested by undercover police officers when they attempted to meet their victims. In two cases, the offenders' expressed intent was to purchase or exchange items for the victim to enhance cybersex (high-heeled shoes, web camera). In the third case, the offender did attempt to meet the victim at a fast food restaurant and was subsequently arrested. Prior to this meeting, the offender had engaged in several instances of cybersex and telephone sex reaching sexual orgasm on each occasion. This offender was classified as fantasy-driven as a result of the several incidents of cybersex or telephone sex. According to these classification criteria, 30 subjects were designated contact-driven and 21 subjects were designated fantasy-driven.

The Contact-Driven Offender Compared
With the Fantasy-Driven Offender

In terms of apprehension, all fantasy-driven offenders were arrested as part of an Internet sex sting. As discussed above, three fantasy-driven offenders were arrested when they attempted to meet the victim, the remaining 18 participants were arrested as part of a "ruse." Undercover police officers contacted these offenders by phone or Instant Message and requested that they travel to the police department to sign a written agreement to

cease all chat room conversations. Offenders were subsequently arrested when they arrived at the police department. In contrast, 93.3% of the contact-driven offenders scheduled a specific face-to-face meeting, 80% making an attempt to meet their victim at the agreed on location. Contact-driven offenders engaged in a comparatively short relationship prior to an attempted meeting, with almost half who attempted to meet their victim less than 24 hr after first online contact. Fantasy-driven offenders' online relationships lasted an average of 32.90 days, with a maximum of 180 days. As a result of the online dynamics described earlier, influenced by offender motivation (contact-driven vs. fantasy driven) and law enforcement efficacy in their apprehension of offenders, data concerning the relationship duration between groups are significantly skewed. As a result, most online relationships were of a shorter duration as a result of the contact-driven offender's near immediate availability to meet with an available victim and law enforcement increasing efficacy to locate the fantasy-driven offenders. Therefore, median values provide a more accurate description of the relationship duration between offender and victim. The median value for the contact-driven group in terms of relationship duration is 2 days, and the median value for the fantasy-driven group is 5 days.

Offender demographics reveal differences between groups. Contact-driven sex offenders were younger and most had never been married. In contrast, fantasy-driven offenders were older and most were either married or divorced prior to arrest. Loosely connected with the age differences, contact-driven sex offenders attended less formal education and were more likely to be unemployed. Fantasy-driven offenders had a low unemployment rate and four offenders were self-employed.

Comparing online sexual behaviors, contact-driven offenders engaged in relatively few sexual behaviors with the exception of online grooming (see Table 5). Thus, in summary, the relationship was comparatively short; they attempted to meet the victim with the desired sexual behaviors to occur in person. Qualitative data yielded the finding that the sexually explicit chat was used to locate a sexually active teen, determine if they were willing to have sex with an adult, if they were willing to keep the secret, and describe the behaviors that would occur during the meeting. Fantasy-driven offenders engaged in a variety of cybersex behaviors and three subjects actually initiated online contact while nude and in front of a web camera. The fantasy-driven offender's sexually explicit interpersonal communication was utilized to describe their sexual behaviors and to encourage their victim to engage in similar behaviors.

Concerning mental health, differences presented in diagnosis of sexual disorders as fantasy-driven offenders were more often diagnosed with a paraphilia. This appears consistent with the fact that the contact-driven offenders sought out contact offenses whereas fantasy-driven offenders sought out cybersex and exhibitionist-like behavior. Regarding personality disorders, fantasy-driven offenders were more often diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder. Regarding potentially compulsive, although not necessarily illegal sexual behaviors, the contact-driven group admitted to an average masturbation frequency of 4.10 times per week, whereas fantasy-driven offenders admitted to masturbating an average of 5.48 times per week. Both groups described

compulsive pornography use, admitted soliciting adults online regularly, and engaged in activities that were not initiated on the Internet specifically one-night stands, group sex, and sex with prostitutes. A limitation on an assessment of sexual compulsivity results from participants' likely underreporting of frequency to attempt to present normal during an evaluation that may impact sentencing.

Discussion

Clinical Implications

Discovery of the contact-driven and fantasy-driven chat room sex offender subtypes describe apparently distinct offender motivations in the context of the Internet-initiated offenses. The contact-driven offender utilizes Internet chat rooms as a medium to connect with other people in the online community, with an intention to develop a sexual relationship with a teenage female (or male). Thus, the function of the Internet is as a medium for victim location, communication, relationship building (grooming), and coordination of a future meeting place. This offender will also transfer communication to telephone and text communication. The Internet may continue as a communication medium between offline meetings. In contrast, the fantasy-driven offender utilizes the Internet as a sexual medium to connect with teens for the purpose of cybersex and masturbation. The function of the Internet is as an exclusive connection medium for sexual behavior unless a telephone is used as well. The results of this study define these two groups as mutually exclusive; however, given the limited sample and police initiative to apprehend, this conclusion is tentative. Data suggest a tentative offender typology including subtypes that need to be replicated in future studies.

Clinically, the chat room sex offenders' motivation to offend does not appear to stem from sexual deviance or criminological behavior patterns but instead from social isolation, dysphoric moods, and increased social isolation due to increasing involvement in the Internet community. It is hypothesized that an individual's increased involvement with Internet-related sexual behaviors may result in decreased involvement with "real" interpersonal and sexual interactions. Kafka (2010) suggests that persons with "paraphilia-related disorders" (protracted promiscuity, compulsive masturbation, pornography dependence, and cyber-sex dependence) may withdraw from sexual encounters with a partner in preference to engage in unconventional sexual activities. As prior authors have written, the Internet provides a socially isolated adult with an impersonal social outlet, and a sexual outlet, without the risk of face-to-face rejection. Online romantic and sexual relationships with teenagers are ostensibly less threatening than relationships with adults and may represent one of many sexual fantasies (Laulik, Allam, & Sheridan, 2007; Middleton, Elliott, Mandeville-Norden, & Beech, 2006; Putnam, 2000). In addition, online relationships with at-risk teens may be even less threatening as the offender may act as a confidential source of support and friendship. Furthermore, the Internet provides a medium to engage in sexual behaviors that were restricted beforehand and viewed as taboo. These high rates of behaviors

may be described as compulsive when they reinforce the offender's isolation and avoidance, increasing the time he spends in online chat rooms eventually resulting in his arrest for a sexual offense. Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies (1999) and Quayle, Vaughan, and Taylor (2006) suggest that sexually compulsive behaviors reinforce enjoyment, as well as provide a distraction from uncomfortable emotions. This appears to apply to the sample of participants in this study, as reflected in the frequency of diagnoses of depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorder. In defining sexually compulsive behaviors, Långström and Hanson (2006) defined compulsive sexual behavior as high rates of masturbation, pornography use, and protracted promiscuity (impersonal sex). Although not directly referenced by the authors, compulsive use of Internet chat rooms for purposes of sexual solicitation (adults and/or adolescents) and cybersex may also be defined as sexually compulsive. Kafka (2001) makes a direct reference to cybersex dependence as ". . . repetitive, time-consuming use of Internet associated chat rooms associated with enactment or planned enactment of sexual behavior" (p. 233). According to the Långström and Hanson (2006) study, participants in this study may meet diagnostic criteria for hypersexuality as a result of their masturbation frequency (in excess of 4 times per week), cybersex dependence, Internet pornography dependence, and the use of the Internet to solicit adolescents resulting in criminal prosecution. Kafka (2010) proposed a diagnosis for the *DSM-V* of hypersexual disorder. Criteria include recurrent sexual fantasies that interfere with nonsexual goals, engaging in sexual fantasies in response to dysphoric mood states or stressful life events, unsuccessful attempts to control the behavior, disregard of emotional harm to self or others, and clinically significant distress or impairment. Additional research is needed on the chat room sex offender concerning his compulsive sexual behaviors.

Internet Sting Process as a Confound to Chat Room Typology

Tentative discovery of the fantasy-driven and contact-driven subgroups are based on a significant confounding variable, the Internet sex sting. As a result, the presence of an undercover police officer instead of a live victim appears to significantly impact results of the study. First, most offenders were apprehended by the same specialized investigation unit. Therefore, uniform strategies for offender apprehension were applied to each participant including creation of a young, sexually explicit profile, responding openly to sexual solicitations, and immediate complicity in a face-to-face meeting. Second, chat room dynamics were based on an interaction between an adult male and an adult male (or female) police officer posing as a teen, trained to interact and respond to sexual solicitations in an adolescent's language. This interaction appeared to impact offender interest, continued conversation, and the participants' complicity to a face-to-face meeting. Of the contact-driven group, approximately 70% attempted to meet with their victim after communicating for less than a week, and 40% attempted to meet with their victim in less than 24 hr. This behavior appears to be inconsistent with adolescent vulnerability, especially with at-risk teens who may have an inherent distrust in adults in their lives. A relationship between an adult and an at-risk teen would

most likely develop slowly. In addition, motivation of the police investigators to apprehend participants early in the process, especially in more recent cases, limited findings on those particular participants simply due to the absence of data.

Interactions between police officers and participants leading to arrest resulted in two potential findings. Undercover police officers' successful monitoring of Internet chat rooms had prevented sexual exploitation of children. Second, Internet sex stings have resulted in the "creation" of a new crime (enticement/Internet luring) and a new type of sex offender. Offender conviction was based on what the offender may have done, including deviant thoughts, and not an illegal sexual behavior (Wright, 2009). These convicted sex offenders, who may never have victimized a child, must now register as sex offenders and be managed in the community and/or by the Department of Corrections. Answers to these questions were not within the scope of the study but present a significant clinical issue in that most chat room sex offenders mandated to offense-specific treatment may not have an identifiable victim and instead, responded to sexual overtures of an undercover police officer.

Study Limitations

A sample size of 51 chat room sex offenders from one agency in Colorado do not represent all chat room sex offenders who attempt to engage in illegal sexual behavior with adolescents. Furthermore, the vicissitudes of a sting operation present additional confounds that can only be speculated. Of the six live teenage females solicited by the participants, two made the decision to alert their parents and/or local police departments, instead of submitting to sexual solicitations. These individuals were not formally identified as victims by law enforcement. Four participants actually victimized an adolescent and victim impact statements reflect that harm resulted. Vicarious victimization appears to have resulted from the investigation, parent and community discovery of the offense, and potential legal involvement. Additional research is needed to determine if the reported findings hold when additional participants are studied and if Internet sex stings truly are a deterrent to Internet sex crimes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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