



# Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors: The Response of Law Enforcement



# **Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors: The Response of Law Enforcement**

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# Contents

Acknowledgments.....v

Executive Summary.....vii

Introduction.....ix

    How the Study Was Conducted.....ix

    Definition of Internet-Related.....xi

Arrest Estimate for Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors.....1

Types of Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors.....3

    Internet Crimes With Identified Victims.....4

    Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement.....4

    Internet Child Pornography.....5

Characteristics of Offenders and Offenses.....7

The Nature of the Child Pornography Possessed by Offenders.....9

Justice-System Management of Cases.....11

Case Outcomes.....15

Discussion: Implications for Law Enforcement.....17

References.....19



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## Executive Summary

The Internet<sup>1</sup> and computers have come to play a growing role in sex crimes that are committed against children and youth.<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-1990s these developing technologies have posed challenges for law enforcement requiring them to confront situations not anticipated in criminal statutes, master technical advances, develop new investigative techniques, and handle criminal cases that often span multiple jurisdictions. To assist, legislators have acted on a number of fronts creating new statutes that encompass Internet offenses, stiffening penalties, and creating a national clearinghouse for reports of Internet-related crimes against children and the CyberTipline<sup>®</sup> operated by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. In addition the federal government has increased funding in this area creating Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces to support state and local law enforcement and specialized Internet, child-exploitation units in federal, law-enforcement agencies.

Unfortunately the results of these initiatives are difficult to track. Criminal-justice authorities do not collect information specifically about Internet-related crimes. The *National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-JOV) Study* was undertaken to get a sense of the scope and types of law-enforcement activity in this area and serve as a baseline for monitoring the growth of Internet sex crimes against minors and related law-enforcement activities.

These are some of the important findings of the *N-JOV Study* about law-enforcement activity.

- Law enforcement at all levels made an estimated 2,577 arrests during the 12 months starting July 1, 2000, for Internet sex crimes against minors
- These Internet sex crimes against minors can be categorized in three mutually exclusive types
  - Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims involving Internet-related sexual assaults and other sex crimes such as the production of child pornography<sup>3</sup> committed against identified victims (39% of arrests)
  - Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement posing as minors that involved **no** identified victims (25% of arrests)
  - The possession, distribution, or trading of Internet Child Pornography by offenders who did not use the Internet to sexually exploit identified victims or solicit undercover investigators (36% of arrests)

<sup>1</sup>The term “Internet” is broadly used to include any sort of online activity.

<sup>2</sup>The terms “children” and “youth” refer to minors younger than 18.

<sup>3</sup>The term “child pornography,” because it implies simply conventional pornography with child subjects, is an inappropriate term to describe the true nature and extent of sexually exploitive images of child victims. Use of this term should not be taken to imply that children “consented” to the sexual acts depicted in these photographs; however, it is the term most readily recognized by the public, at this point in time, to describe this form of child sexual exploitation. It is used in this report to refer to illegal pictorial material involving children under the standards developed by statute, case law, and law-enforcement-agency protocols. It is hoped that a more accurate term will be recognized, understood, and accepted for use in the near future.

- Two-thirds (67%) of offenders who committed any of the types of Internet sex crimes against minors possessed child pornography
  - 83% of these possessors had images of children between the ages of 6 and 12
  - 80% had images explicitly showing sexual penetration of minors
- The vast majority of offenders were non-Hispanic White males older than 25 who were acting alone
- Most investigations (79%) involved more than one law-enforcement agency
- State, county, and local agencies were involved in 85% of all cases and federal agencies in 46%
- It appears there are fewer dismissals and acquittals for Internet sex crimes against minors than for conventional child-sexual-abuse prosecutions

# Introduction

As Internet use has become widespread, questions have emerged about how often sexual offenders are using the Internet to commit crimes involving child sexual exploitation and child pornography. These types of Internet sex crimes against minors have caused concern among parents, law-enforcement agencies, lawmakers, educators, and other child advocates and become a factor in the debate over Internet regulation. Media reports about them have proliferated; however, media reports may produce a skewed picture of the characteristics of these crimes and overall numbers of arrests.

Because Internet sex crimes against minors are a recent phenomenon, data about them have not been gathered in a national study. The *N-JOV Study* is the first national research to systematically collect data about the number and characteristics of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors. The *N-JOV Study* had the three goals of

- Estimating a baseline number of arrests during a one-year period so that the growth of these cases in the criminal-justice system can be measured in the future
- Providing a statistical portrait of the characteristics of Internet sex crimes against minors and description of how they are handled within the criminal-justice system
- Organizing the variety of cases into a typology useful for tracking and analysis

This bulletin is the first publication of findings from the *N-JOV Study*. It discusses arrest estimates and gives an overview of the types of crimes, characteristics of offenders, and how the criminal-justice system is handling Internet sex crimes against minors.

## How the Study Was Conducted

- The *N-JOV Study* collected information from a national sample of law-enforcement agencies about the characteristics of Internet sex crimes against minors and the numbers of arrests for these crimes during a one-year period.
- The goals of the methodology were to design a representative national sample of law-enforcement agencies that would give an overall picture of these crimes in the U.S., understand how these cases emerged and were handled in a diverse group of agencies, and get detailed data about the characteristics of these crimes from well-informed, reliable sources.
- Law-enforcement investigators were interviewed, because investigators have been in the forefront of identifying and combating these crimes and are the best sources of accessible, in-depth information about their nature.
- A focus was placed on cases that ended in arrests rather than crime reports or open investigations because cases ending in arrests were more likely to involve actual crimes; had more complete information about the crimes, offenders, and victims; gave a clear standard for counting cases; and helped avoid interviewing multiple agencies about the same case.

- First a national sample of 2,574 state, county, and local law-enforcement agencies was surveyed by mail asking them if they had made arrests in Internet-related, child-pornography or sexual-exploitation cases. Then detailed telephone interviews were conducted with investigators who had such cases. The methodology was modeled after that used in the second *National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART-2)* to survey law-enforcement agencies about child-abduction cases.
- A stratified sample of law-enforcement agencies was created to get information from agencies that specialized in Internet sex crimes against minors and still allow every agency a chance to be selected in the sample. To do this the agencies were divided into the three groups noted below.
  - Agencies that specialized in investigating Internet sex crimes against minors. These included the 30 Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces and satellites, in operation at that point in time, funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Justice, and units of 4 federal agencies specializing in Internet crimes.
  - A random sample of 833 agencies known to have sent staff members to training classes addressing Internet sex crimes against minors drawn from lists provided by training organizations.
  - A random sample of 12% of all other U.S. state, county, and local law-enforcement agencies (n = 1,666) drawn from an annually updated directory of all U.S. law-enforcement agencies.
- 88% of the agencies (n = 2,270) that received mail surveys responded.
- 17% of the participating agencies (n = 385) reported a total of 1,723 arrests.
- Interviews were conducted on all eligible cases that had identified victims or came from agencies reporting three or fewer cases. When agencies reported four or more cases, a random subsample of cases was selected for interviews.
- To be eligible, cases had to
  - Have victims younger than 18.
  - Involve arrests between July 1, 2000, and June 30, 2001.
  - Be Internet-related.
- Of the 796 eligible cases in the sample, interviews were completed for 79% (n = 630). Of the 21% that were not completed, 13% involved agencies that did not respond to requests for interviews, 3% involved respondents who refused to be interviewed, and 5% involved duplicate cases or cases that could not be identified.
- A statistical technique called “weighting” was used to estimate annual numbers of arrests. Weighting takes into account sampling procedures and non-response, allowing use of the data to project estimated annual arrest totals with 95% confidence that the accurate number will fall within a specific range.

For a complete report about the methodology of this study, please e-mail the authors through the Crimes against Children Research Center website at [www.unh.edu/ccrc](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc).

### **Definition of Internet-Related**

Cases were Internet-related if any of the criteria noted below were met.

- An offender-victim relationship was initiated online
- An offender who was a family member or prior acquaintance of a victim used the Internet to
  - Communicate with a victim to further a sexual victimization, or
  - Otherwise exploit the victim
- A case involved an Internet-related undercover investigation
- Child pornography was received or distributed online, or arrangements for receiving or distributing were made online
- Child pornography was found on a computer, on removable media such as floppy and compact disks, as computer printouts, or in a digital format



## Arrest Estimate for Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors

There were an estimated 2,577 arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors in the 12 months starting July 1, 2000. This is an estimated number with a 2.5% margin of error in either direction, which means that the true number is between 2,277 and 2,877 arrests.

This estimate is by no means a full measure of the number of Internet sex crimes against minors or even the number of such crimes known to law enforcement. It is only an estimate of the number of **arrests** for such crimes. Many sex crimes against minors, perhaps the majority, never come to the attention of law enforcement (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2000; Kilpatrick & Saunders, 1999; Finkelhor & Dzuiba-Leatherman, 1994), and many of those known to law enforcement do not culminate in arrest (Finkelhor & Cross, in press).

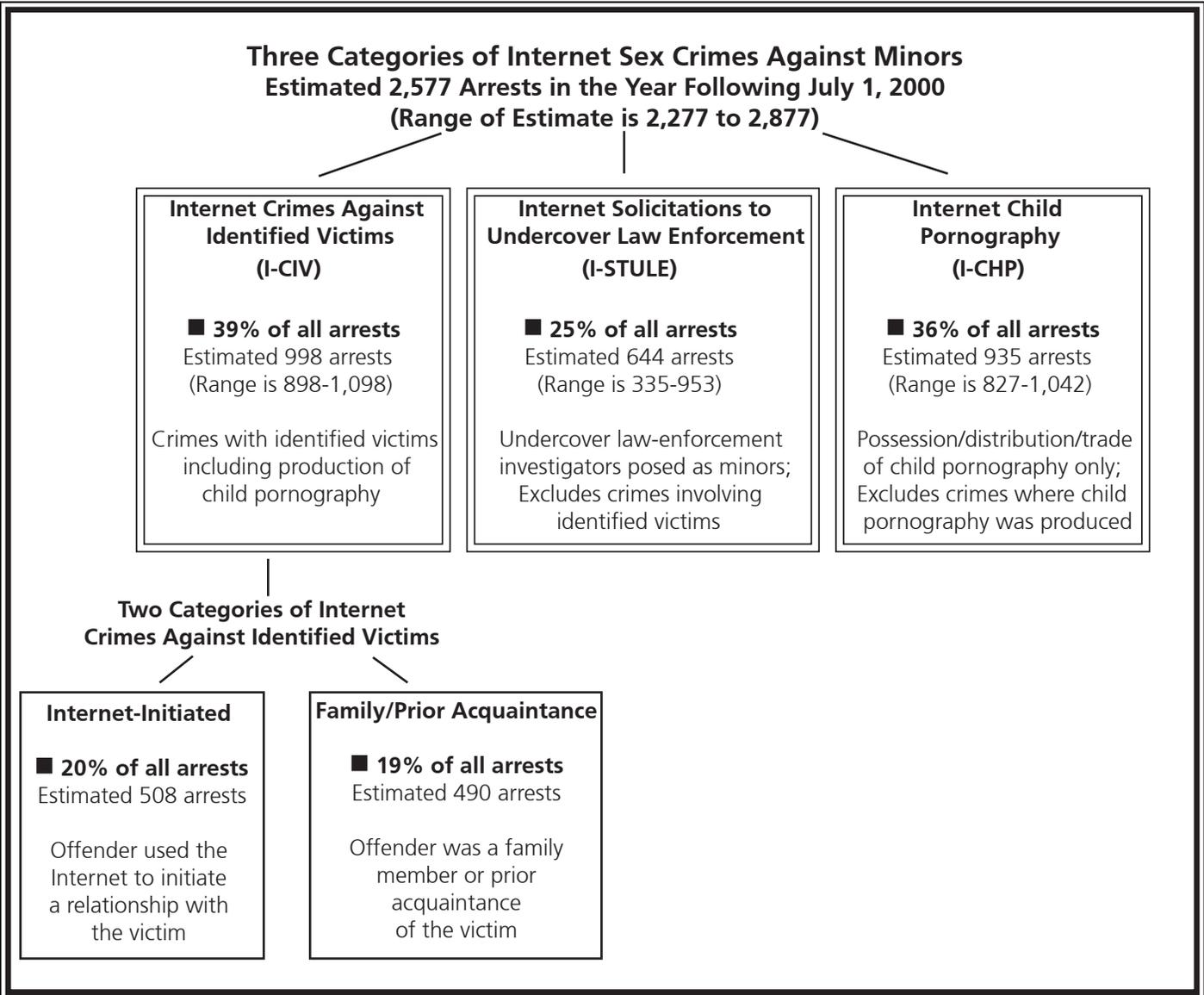
Nevertheless, the estimate of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors does reflect a great deal of law-enforcement activity only a few years after the emergence of these crimes as a public-policy concern. For comparison, a rough estimate made by these authors from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) suggests that there were approximately 65,000 arrests in the year 2000 for all types of sexual assaults against minors. Clearly, in that year, Internet crimes were still a small fraction of this total; however, all indications are that law-enforcement activity and consequently arrests are growing in this particular crime domain.



# Types of Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors

Internet sex crimes against minors comprise a diverse range of offenses including completed and attempted sexual assaults; illegal use of the Internet to transmit sexual material to and solicit minors; and the possession, distribution, and production of child pornography. Because of this diversity, it was important to group cases into categories that shared crucial common elements in terms of the challenges posed for law-enforcement investigators. This led to a threefold classification that distinguished cases with identified victims, cases involving undercover investigations but no child victims, and cases solely involving the possession and distribution of child pornography. The categories are mutually exclusive and were defined and counted as noted below.

Figure 1



Note: The ranges for each estimate constitute margins of error, calculated separately, for each estimate using a statistical formula based on the weighted number of cases in each category.

## Internet Crimes With Identified Victims

Crimes with Identified Victims is the only category that has victims of Internet-related crimes who were identified and contacted during the criminal investigation. This category is referred to as “Identified-Victim” or I-CIV cases. These cases included completed and attempted sex crimes, both forcible and non-forcible, production of child pornography, and illegal Internet solicitations. An estimated 998 I-CIV arrests were made, which constituted 39% of all arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors.

The most publicized Identified-Victim cases are crimes in which offenders lured and victimized youth whom they first met online; however, such cases, which were termed Internet-Initiated episodes, only made up about half of the total Identified-Victim cases, or about 508 arrests. The other half of the I-CIV cases involved offenders already known to their victims as family members or prior acquaintances who used the Internet to communicate with identified victims; groom them or instruct them in sexual activities; produce and market pornographic images of the victims; or, in a few cases, facilitate the victimization of children by advertising prostitution involving minors. These Family and Prior Acquaintance Identified-Victim cases comprised about 490 arrests.

The fact that the Family and Prior Acquaintance I-CIV cases are almost as numerous as the more widely publicized and discussed Internet-Initiated I-CIV cases has important implications for prevention and investigation. It is important that the media, the public, and law enforcement do not assume all Internet sex crimes against minors originate through offenders who seek out victims in chatrooms and other online venues. Sex offenders who access children in more conventional ways may also use the Internet, and their computers can provide strong evidence against them and corroboration of victim testimony.

## Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement

A second distinct set of Internet sex crimes against minors involved arrests for Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement. I-STULE cases are often referred to among law enforcement as “pro-active” cases in which law-enforcement officers pose as minors, typically 13 to 15 year olds, in chatrooms and Internet personal profiles and wait to be contacted by offenders seeking underage victims. This category encompasses only offenders who were caught in undercover investigations and not known to have committed Internet-related crimes against identified victims. Sometimes law enforcement discovered that these offenders had sexually exploited an underage victim who was identified and contacted by law enforcement. If the crime against the identified victim was Internet-related, the case was classified as an Identified-Victim arrest. If the crime was not Internet-related, however, the case was left in the I-STULE category. Also classified as Identified-Victim arrests were “reactive” undercover investigations in which investigators took on the identities of identified victims, for example in cases where youths reported online solicitations to law enforcement or parents found out about crimes. This means that none of the arrests in the I-STULE category involved identified victims of Internet-related

crimes, and, in this sense, these crimes were attempted victimizations. There were an estimated 644 arrests or about 25% of all arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors in this category.

### **How Typical Investigations of Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement Are Conducted**

- A law-enforcement investigator posts a profile on the Internet or goes into a chatroom posing as a girl or boy, usually in the age range of 13 to 15 and waits to be contacted by an adult seeking a young adolescent for a sexual encounter. The investigator responds to a conversation initiated by an offender and allows the offender to develop a relationship that culminates in a face-to-face meeting, where the offender is arrested. The investigator is careful not to initiate conversations about sexual topics or propose sexual activity.
- The agent uses investigative resources to track down the identity of the offender and keeps logs of all online interactions, which constitute evidence of the crime.
- The offender is charged with attempted sexual assault and, in some jurisdictions, illegal use of a computer to solicit a minor. In some cases other crimes, like distribution of child pornography, are committed.
- The legal decisions pertaining to entrapment in undercover drug operations apply to Internet undercover operations. Investigators may not improperly induce a person to commit a criminal act.
- These cases are often referred to as “pro-active” because they allow law enforcement to act without waiting for an offender to commit a crime against a juvenile victim.

## **Internet Child Pornography**

A third distinct set of crimes involved offenders who used the Internet to possess, distribute, and/or trade child pornography, but did not produce child pornography or offend in any other Internet-related way against identified victims or solicit an undercover investigator posing as a minor. This category is referred to as “CP Possession” or I-CHP cases. CP Possessors downloaded, distributed, or otherwise used the Internet to acquire or trade child pornography, but did not, as part of their crime, use the Internet to attempt or actually molest, seduce, or take sexual pictures of individual children who they knew or had first met online. Because much child pornography depicts sexual offenses against minors, it is widely acknowledged that the possession and trading of child pornography further victimizes the children depicted. Cases involving the possession or distribution of child pornography alone, without other sex crimes, however, have distinct features, among them that the victims shown in child-pornography images are rarely identified by law enforcement. If offenders who possessed or distributed child pornography also used the Internet to sexually exploit identified victims or made solicitations to undercover law enforcement, these arrests were listed in the previous categories. This category comprised 935 arrests or about 36% of all the arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors.



# Characteristics of Offenders and Offenses

Almost all offenders<sup>4</sup> were male (99%), non-Hispanic White (92%), older than 25 (86%), and acted alone in the crimes they committed (97%). Few (11%) were known to be violent in any manner. About 10% had prior arrests for sexually offending against minors.

While each offender was sorted into the three mutually exclusive categories previously described of Identified Victim, Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement, or CP Possession, the offenders in each category committed a variety of offenses. Importantly, two-thirds (67%) of all offenders possessed child pornography. By definition, all the CP Possession arrests involved this crime, but, in addition, 52% of the Identified-Victim cases involved offenders who possessed child pornography, as did 41% of the cases involving Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Offenders Who Were Arrested for Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors**

<b>Offender Characteristics</b>	<b>% (weighted n = 2,577)</b>
<b>Gender of Offender</b>	
Male	99%
<b>Race of Offender</b>	
Non-Hispanic White	92%
<b>Age of Offender</b>	
17 or Younger	3%
18 to 25	11%
26 to 39	45%
40 or Older	41%
<b>Other Characteristics</b>	
Acted Alone in Crime	97%
Prior Arrests for Sexual Offending Against Minors	10%
Known to Be Violent to any Degree	11%
Possessed Child Pornography	67%
Distributed Child Pornography	22%
Solicited an Undercover Investigator	27%
Committed a Sex Crime Against an Identified Victim	45%
<b>Crime Against Identified Victim Was</b>	
Internet-Initiated	20%
Against a Family Member or Prior Acquaintance of the Offender	19%
Not Internet-Related	7%

<sup>4</sup>“Offenders” were defined as alleged perpetrators of crimes who were arrested.

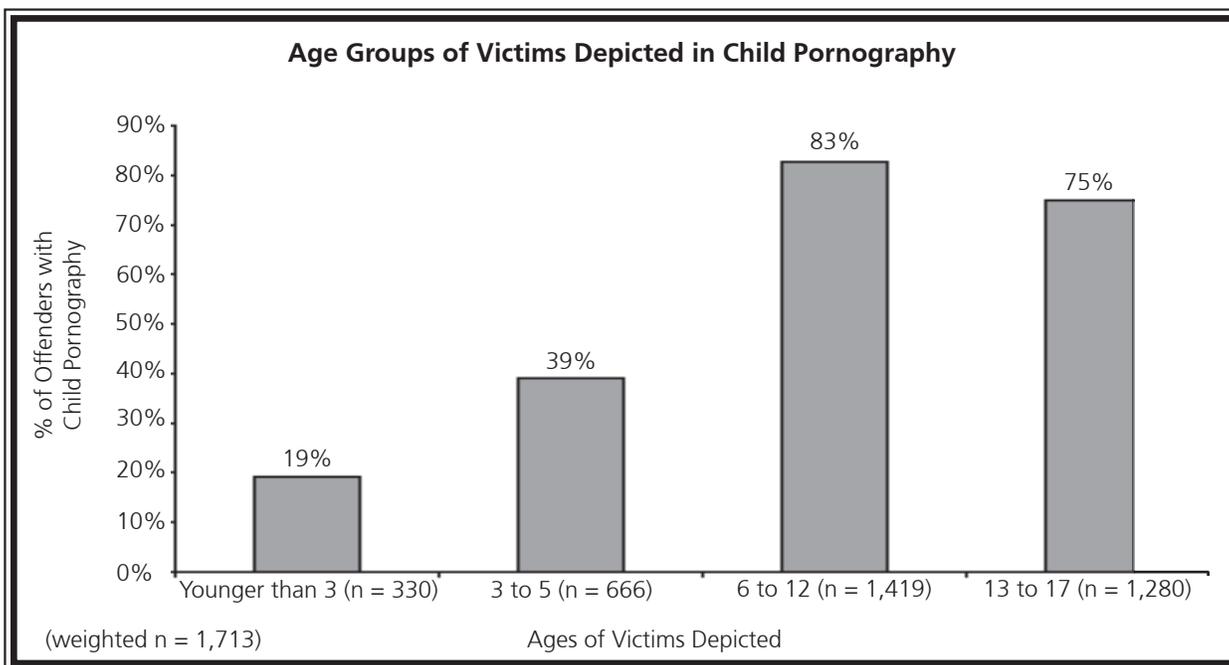


## The Nature of the Child Pornography Possessed by Offenders

Because the federal and many state laws criminalizing child pornography apply to images of minors through age 17 and include “lascivious” images that may not depict actual sexual activity or even nudity, there has been debate about the true nature and seriousness of the child pornography for which offenders are being arrested. The vast majority of arrests in this study concerned serious, graphic forms of child pornography and images of prepubescent children.

Eighty-three percent of offenders who possessed child pornography, in all three of the categories described above, had images depicting children between the ages of 6 and 12. These were typically not the only images these offenders possessed, but most offenders who possessed child pornography had at least some images of prepubescent children. Most of these offenders also possessed images depicting graphic sexual activity. Ninety-two percent had images of minors that focused on genitals or showed explicit sexual activity; 80% had pictures showing acts involving the penetration of a child, including oral sex; and 71% possessed images showing sexual contact between an adult and a minor, defined as an adult touching the genitals or breasts of a minor, or vice-versa. One-fifth (21%) had child pornography depicting violence such as bondage, rape, or torture.

Figure 2



This suggests that offenders are not being arrested for possessing marginal or ambiguous sexual images of minors such as images where it is hard to ascertain whether the subject is a minor or where the context was casual nudity without sexual abuse to the child. Researchers cannot extrapolate from these cases to the topic of child-pornography possession in general, because it is likely more serious images would predominate among cases ending in arrests. Researchers also relied on the judgment of the investigating officers to characterize the pictures. Nonetheless, these results suggest that law-enforcement activity concerning child pornography is encountering or targeting primarily offenders with images showing graphic abuse of young children.

**Table 2. Percentage of Offenders With Child Pornography Who Possessed Specified Types of Images of Children**

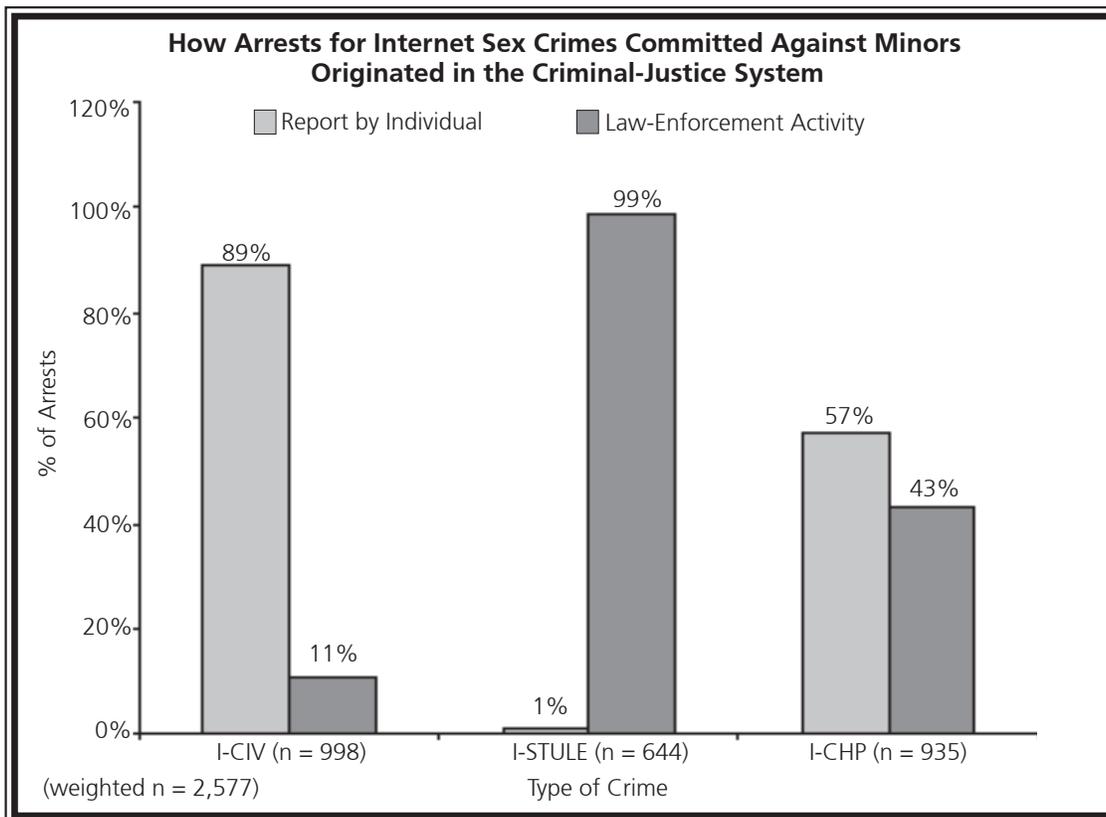
Characteristics of Child-Pornography Images	% (weighted n = 1,713)
<b>Images Depicted</b>	
Genitals or Explicit Sexual Activity	92%
Penetration of a Minor	80%
Sexual Contact Between an Adult and a Minor	71%
Violence	21%

# Justice-System Management of Cases

Law enforcement has responded in a variety of ways to the threats posed by Internet sex crimes against minors. Specialized units have been established in federal agencies like the FBI, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The U.S. Department of Justice has also funded Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces around the country to develop specialized investigative and training expertise. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children has set up the CyberTipline to encourage the reporting and investigation of Internet child pornography and other online threats to children. A number of organizations, including NCMEC and the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, have been training state and local law enforcement in procedures for conducting online investigations and undercover operations and collecting evidence in Internet-related cases.

Thus it should not be surprising that the response to Internet sex crimes against minors originated from a wide variety of sources and involved a wide variety of agencies. Overall, 55% of arrests were initiated by reports from non-law-enforcement sources such as parents of victims and individuals who discovered child pornography. The other 45% resulted directly from law-enforcement activity such as undercover operations; monitoring of chatrooms and websites; and, in some

Figure 3

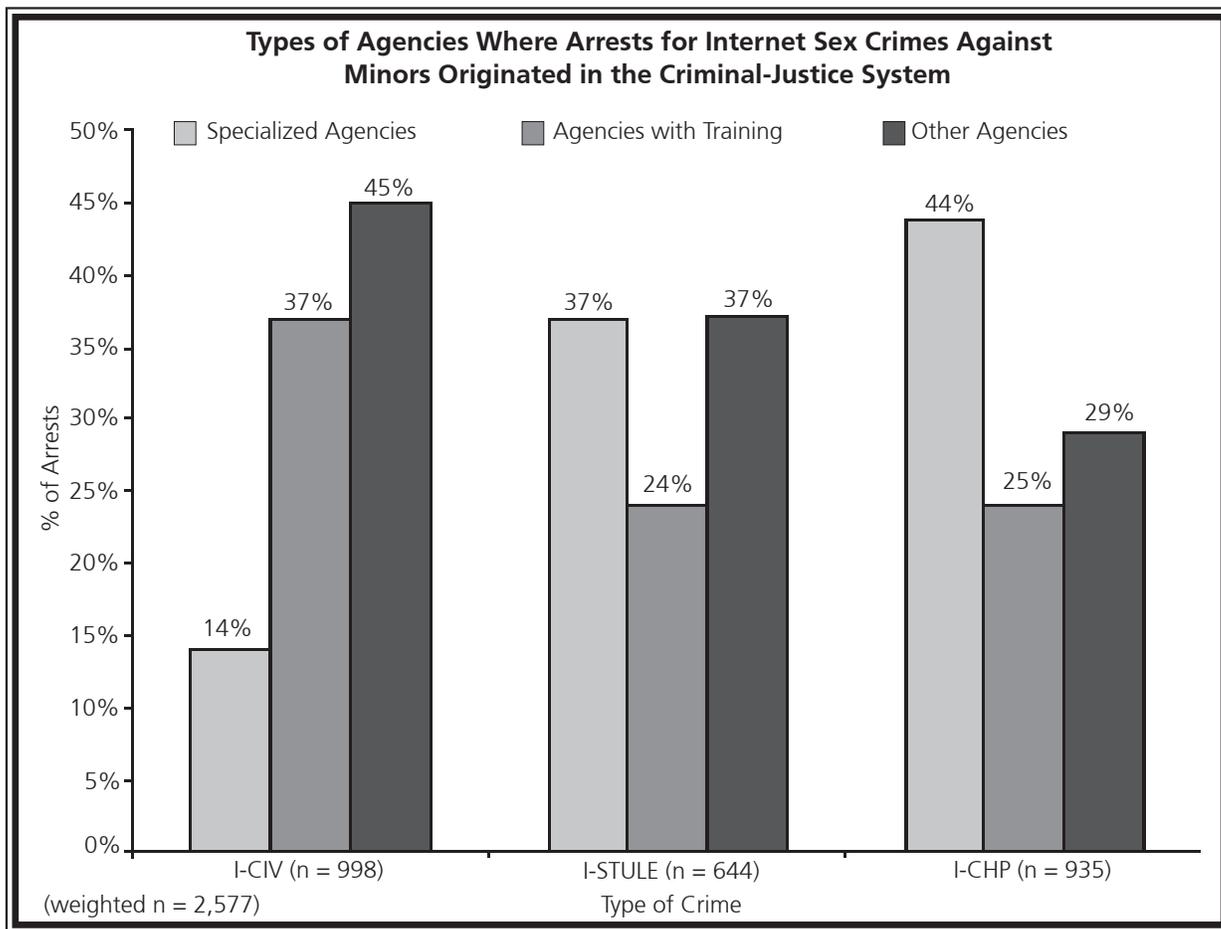


**I-CIV:** Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims  
**I-STULE:** Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement  
**I-CHP:** Internet Child Pornography

cases, non-Internet-related, law-enforcement activities like drug investigations. Most arrests in Identified-Victim cases (89%) originated from reports by sources outside of law enforcement. And almost all arrests for Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement, not surprisingly, originated with law-enforcement undercover activity, while the CP Possession cases began about equally from both sources.

Initial responsibility for Internet sex crimes against minors rested with the full gamut of law-enforcement agencies. In 31% of arrests, cases originated in specialized agencies established to deal with these crimes, including federal agencies with Internet, child-exploitation units and the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces, but it was more common for cases to originate in non-specialized agencies (66%). From the training records maintained by organizations providing support in this area, some information about which agencies had obtained specialized training was known. Slightly more Internet sex crimes against minors originated among the non-specialized agencies with no record of formal training (37%) than among those with training (29%). As might be expected, the specialized agencies tended to have had more involvement in cases relating to the solicitation of undercover officers and CP Possession, but even in these cases, non-specialized agencies and agencies outside the training network played considerable roles.

Figure 4



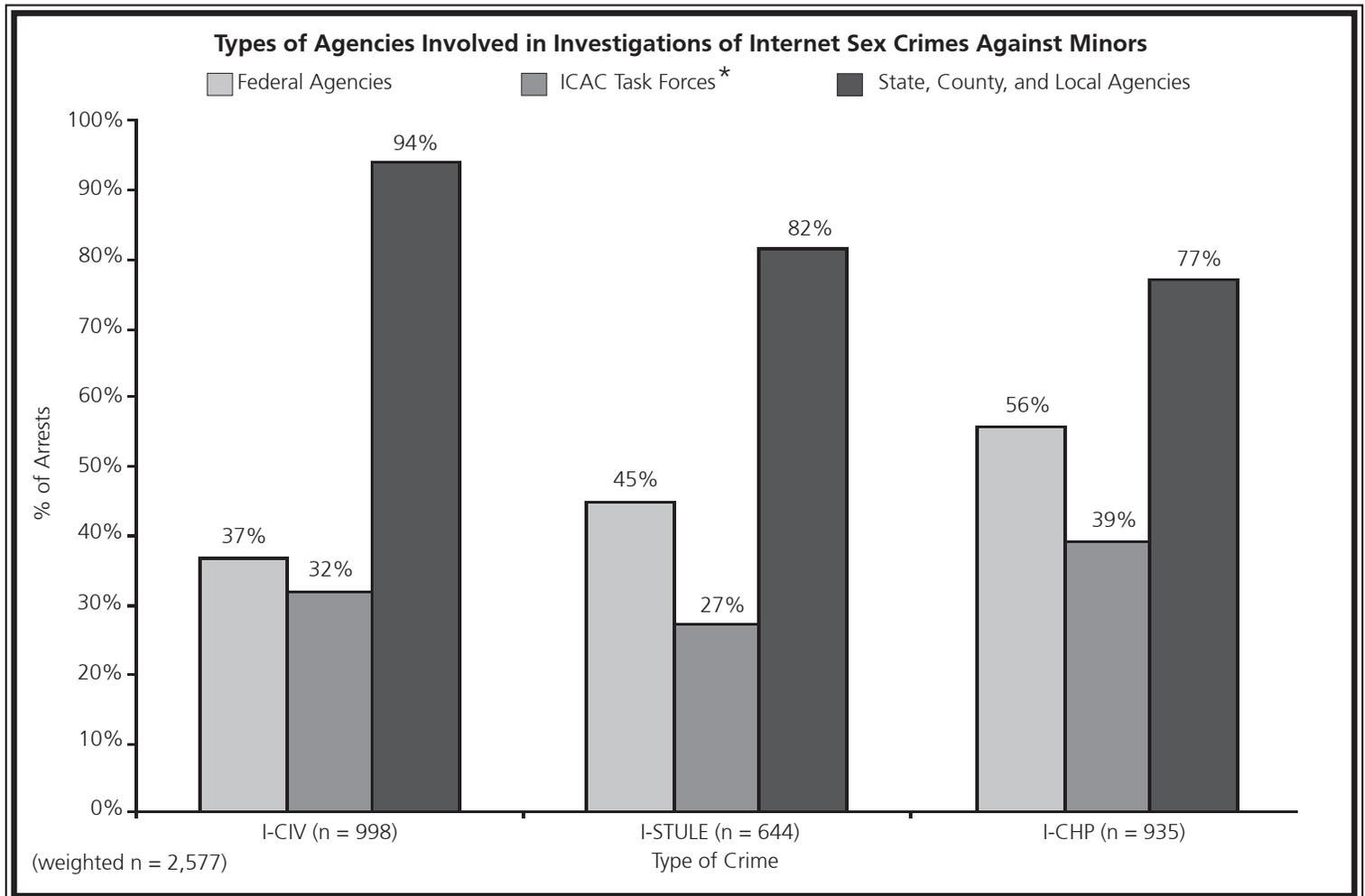
Note: Categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

- I-CIV:** Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims
- I-STULE:** Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement
- I-CHP:** Internet Child Pornography

One notable justice-system feature of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors is the number of investigations that involved multiple agencies. Fully 79% of all the cases in the *N-JOV* sample had two or more agencies participating in the investigation, and 46% had three or more participating agencies. These cases were multijurisdictional for several reasons. Because of the universal character of the Internet, victims, offenders, and investigators are frequently in different locales. Investigators doing undercover work on the Internet may be anywhere in the country, but need local help to effect arrests. Local agencies also frequently request assistance from federal or other authorities who have expertise in these crimes or can provide technical assistance in image analysis or computer forensics. Also federal statutes apply to many Internet-related crimes so federal agencies are often involved.

Most of the cases (85%) involved at least one state, county, or local agency. But the federal role was also very evident with federal agencies involved in 46% of all cases. Federal participation was most common in the CP Possession cases (56%) and somewhat less common in Identified-Victim cases (37%). The ICAC Task Forces were involved in 33% of all cases.

Figure 5



\* Reflects the work of approximately 15 ICAC Task Forces that were operational and investigating these cases during the time frame of this study.

**I-CIV:** Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims  
**I-STULE:** Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement  
**I-CHP:** Internet Child Pornography

The involvement of multiple agencies led to multiple arrests in 25% of the Internet sex crimes against minors. In these situations crimes were committed in more than one jurisdiction. Often federal as well as state laws were broken; however, federal charges were brought in only 21% of cases, in comparison to 85% in which state charges were brought. Clearly federal agencies, which participated in almost half of all investigations, did not bring federal charges in many of those cases.

The diversified and multijurisdictional nature of law-enforcement activity in this area has a number of implications. First, state and local law-enforcement agencies in a wide variety of jurisdictions, many perhaps without a great deal of specialized training, are being called on to respond to Internet sex crimes against minors. This study did not address how many of these crimes are reported to but not pursued by agencies that lack training, resources, or support from other agencies, but this number could be considerable. Given that reality, it seems important that the specialized knowledge and skills to effectively investigate and prosecute these cases continue to be widely disseminated and made available to the full-spectrum of agencies encountering these crimes. This can probably be accomplished both through direct training as well as consulting with agencies at the federal, state, and local level.

Second, because these cases so frequently require multiple-agency involvement, an important part of the training and consultation should concern the protocols for and management of multijurisdictional investigation and prosecution such as those developed by the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces.

## Case Outcomes

Because this is a new area for law enforcement, the question arises whether Internet sex crimes against minors pose particularly challenging obstacles for successful prosecution. Signs of such problems might be unusually high rates of case dismissals or acquittals; however, largely successful prosecutions were found. Of the cases involving state-level charges, 83% of offenders had pled guilty, and an additional 12% had been convicted at trial, while charges were dismissed or dropped in only 5% of cases, and only 0.3% resulted in acquittals. Federal cases had more offenders plead guilty, slightly more charges dismissed or dropped, and no acquittals. The conviction rate suggests a considerable amount of successful prosecution, but the data do not show how many offenders were convicted of original as opposed to reduced charges. Moreover, in both federal and state jurisdictions, some case outcomes were pending or unknown when the *N-JOV Study* interview was conducted. Figure 6 compares cases, by type, combining both federal and state cases. Convictions were somewhat higher for the Identified-Victim cases than for the cases involving solicitation of undercover officers or CP Possession cases, and dismissed or dropped cases were somewhat higher for the CP Possession cases.

**Table 3. Known Outcomes of Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors**

Characteristics	State Charges (weighted n = 1,887)	Federal Charges (weighted n = 527)
<b>Case Resolution</b>		
Plead Guilty	83%	89%
Convicted at Trial	12%	4%
Charges Dismissed or Dropped	5%	7%
Acquittal	<1%	—
<b>Offender Incarcerated Any Length of Time</b>		
	50%	74%
<b>Offender Became a Registered Sex Offender</b>		
	75%	69%

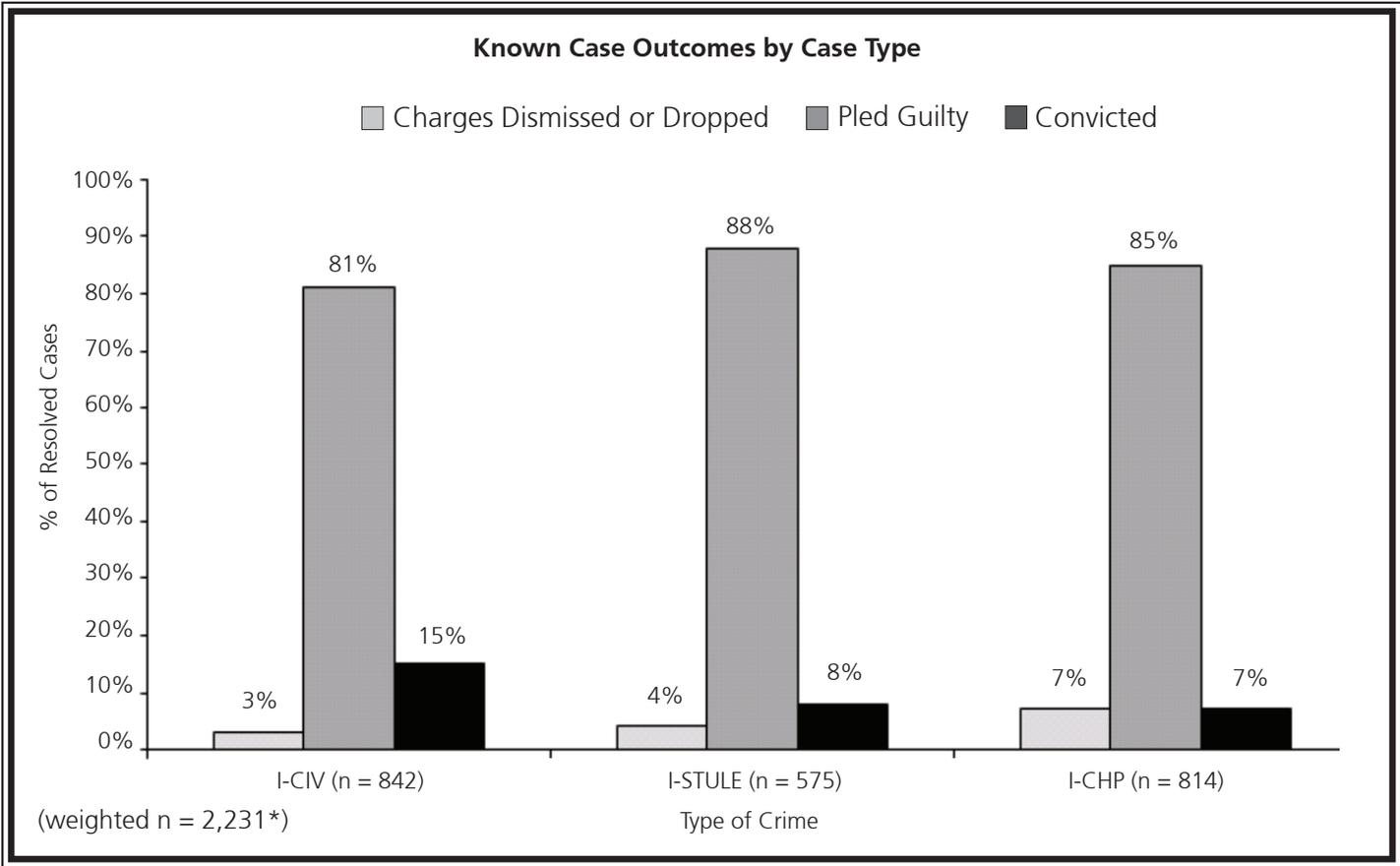
Note: The case outcome was pending or unknown for 14% of cases with state charges and 4% of cases with federal charges.

In comparison, studies of the local prosecution of conventional child-sex-crimes cases typically find an average of 22% of cases dismissed prior to prosecution, with offenders acquitted in 6% of remaining cases accepted for prosecution (Cross, Walsh, Jones, & Simone, 2003). The dismissal rates and acquittals for Internet sex crimes against minors appeared to be lower than those for conventional, child-sexual-abuse prosecutions. Because of the pending status of so many cases, some tentativeness needs to be observed, but the prosecution of Internet sex crimes against minors seems to be relatively successful.

These cases do, nonetheless, pose problems for prosecutors and a concurrent Study of Prosecutorial Outcomes is underway to analyze and detail some of these problems. For example it can be difficult to establish who had access to computers containing criminal evidence. Victims who engaged in potentially embarrassing interchanges with offenders may be unwilling to cooperate and provide testimony. Offenders with downloaded child pornography claim ignorance or incompetence. Offenders caught in undercover operations claim they were just playacting or victims of entrapment.

The evidence of robust conviction rates, however, suggests that prosecutors are successfully overcoming these obstacles. One advantage for prosecutors may be that in Internet sex crimes, as opposed to more conventional sex crimes that rely largely on the testimony of victims, concrete evidence of the offense frequently exists in electronic format.

Figure 6



Note: I-CIV and I-CHP had 0.2% cases end in acquittal. No I-STULE cases ended in acquittal.  
 \* The case outcome was pending or unknown for 13% (weighted n = 345) of cases.  
 Numbers that don't add to 100% of cases are due to rounding and/or weighting.

**I-CIV:** Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims  
**I-STULE:** Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement  
**I-CHP:** Internet Child Pornography

## Discussion: Implications for Law Enforcement

There appears to be considerable law-enforcement activity concerning Internet sex crimes against minors. Moreover, there is certainly much more activity than was measured by this study, because data collection was limited to crimes where arrests were made. These arrests still constitute a relatively small portion of the total law-enforcement effort in the area of child sex crimes, as suggested by the authors' estimate of 89,000 cases of sexual abuse substantiated by child-protective agencies or an extrapolated estimate of 65,000 arrests in the year 2000 for all types of sex crimes against minors based on NIBRS data. But the law-enforcement activities and arrests in Internet-related crimes will almost certainly grow as Internet use spreads, although only future studies similar to this one will be able to confirm this.

The Internet sex crimes against minors were divided into three categories that represent different challenges for law enforcement. The first category, Internet Crimes Against Identified Victims (I-CIV), is the only category that includes victims of Internet-related crimes who were identified and contacted in the course of the investigation. The category of Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement includes attempted crimes by offenders who interacted with investigators posing online as minors, and the CP Possession cases involve pictured victims whose identities are usually unknown. These three categories include a wide variety of sexual offenses.

Moreover, even the Identified-Victim crimes were more diverse than the public might imagine based on media accounts. Identified-Victim cases included Internet-initiated crimes, in which the offender used the Internet to begin a relationship with the victim, as well as sex crimes committed by family members or prior acquaintances of victims who used the Internet in the commission of the crime. The range of crimes committed included sexual abuse and molestation, both forcible and non-forcible; production of child pornography; the illegal use of the Internet to solicit and transmit adult and child pornography to minors; and, in a few cases, the victimization of children through the facilitation of prostitution.

Because of the diversity of crimes and types of offender-victim relationships, it is important not to promote an overly narrow or stereotyped image of Internet sex crimes against minors. Law enforcement and the public need to be attuned to the possibility of Internet connections in a wide variety of sex-crime and sexual-exploitation incidents.

The possession of child pornography was an element in two-thirds (67%) of all Internet sex crimes against minors. This child pornography was of a serious nature. Most offenders (83%) possessed images of children between the ages of 6 and 12, and 80% possessed images that depicted the sexual penetration of minors. It would be a mistake to contend that aggressive enforcement of child-pornography statutes is resulting in the arrests of large numbers of individuals for possessing images about which the legality might be in dispute.

The study reveals that considerable portions of arrests for Internet sex crimes against minors (25%) are of offenders who solicited undercover law-enforcement agents, but who could not be linked with identified victims of Internet-related crimes in the current investigations. These undercover investigations in which agents impersonate youth are a new facet of law-enforcement activity in the sex-crimes-against-minors field, because investigators could not easily deploy decoy targets until the advent of the Internet. This study shows that these investigations now comprise a fairly large component of the law-enforcement activity in this area and one that is resulting in a considerable volume of convictions.

Cases involving Internet sex crimes against minors are clearly complex and time-consuming. Most were multijurisdictional and involved more than one law-enforcement agency. Many involved collaboration between federal and local law enforcement. Many entailed charges brought in more than one jurisdiction. These are clear arguments in favor of continuing efforts to promote collaboration among jurisdictions including multijurisdictional task forces, collaborative protocols, and training of professionals at all levels in how to conduct joint investigations and prosecutions.

In spite of these complexities, the evidence about outcomes suggests that Internet sex crimes against minors are not posing insurmountable difficulties for law enforcement. The rate of dismissed cases and acquittals is possibly lower than for other kinds of child sex offenses. This is even true in cases involving the solicitation of undercover law enforcement and the CP Possession cases, where no victims were identified. It suggests that whatever novelty and complexity the Internet adds to these cases may be offset by other Internet features that aid in prosecution such as transcripts of conversations between the offenders and victims or images of children stored or sent online.

In summary this study provides both worrisome and reassuring information about a new crime domain that is receiving considerable attention. It is clear that while the dynamics and potentials of this new technology are yet to be fully understood, it has created new possibilities for crime and threats to young people. On the other hand the study gives evidence of considerable law-enforcement activity in response to these threats and implementation of both novel and conventional strategies with some success. As this process of threat and response continues, it is clear that this crime domain warrants careful monitoring in the future.

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## National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® (NCMEC) was established in 1984 as a private, nonprofit organization. Per 42 U.S.C. § 5773 and other federal statutes NCMEC is authorized by Congress to perform 19 core functions including the operation of a national, 24-hour, toll-free telephone line by which individuals may report information regarding the location of a missing child and request information about the procedures necessary to reunite a child with his or her legal custodian; operation of the national resource center and information clearinghouse for missing and sexually exploited children; provision of technical assistance and training in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and sexually exploited children; and operation of a CyberTipline® for reporting Internet-related, child sexual exploitation.

A 24-hour, toll-free telephone line, **1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678)**, is available in Canada and the United States for those who have information regarding missing and sexually exploited children. The “phone free” number is 001-800-843-5678 when dialing from Mexico and 00-800-0843-5678 when dialing from many other countries. For a list of other toll-free numbers available when dialing from specific countries visit [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com), and from the home page respectively click on the “More Services” and “24-Hour Hotline” links. The CyberTipline is available worldwide for online reporting of these crimes at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com). The TDD line is 1-800-826-7653. The NCMEC business number is 703-224-2150. The NCMEC facsimile number is 703-224-2122. The NCMEC website address is [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com).

For information about the services offered by NCMEC’s other offices, call them directly in California at 714-508-0150, Florida at 561-848-1900, New York/Buffalo at 716-842-6333, New York/Mohawk Valley at 315-732-7233, New York/Rochester at 585-242-0900, and Texas at 512-465-2156.

To learn more about the existence and nature of other programs being carried out by federal agencies to assist missing and sexually exploited children and their families visit [www.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ncjrs.gov) or call 1-800-851-3420 to obtain *Federal Resources on Missing and Exploited Children* (NCJ 231619).

A number of NCMEC publications, addressing various aspects of the missing- and sexually exploited-child issue, are available free-of-charge in single copies by contacting the



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## Crimes against Children Research Center

The Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) seeks to combat crimes against children by providing high-quality research, statistics, and program evaluation to the public, policymakers, law-enforcement personnel, and other child-welfare practitioners. CCRC maintains a publication list of articles concerning the nature and impact of crimes such as child abduction, homicide, rape, assault, property crimes, and physical and sexual abuse of children written by researchers associated with the CCRC. Current activities funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice include developing questionnaires to assess juvenile crime victimization, evaluating children's advocacy centers, assessing barriers to greater reporting of crimes against children, and studying the incidence of and factors related to child abduction. The CCRC also draws on funding from grants, individual gifts, revenues from publications and programs, and state and federal sources.

The Crimes against Children Research Center was created in 1998 at the University of New Hampshire. It grew out of and expands upon the work of the Family Research Laboratory, which has been devoted to the study of family violence, child victimization, and related topics since 1975. Associated with the CCRC is an internationally recognized group of experts who have published numerous books and articles concerning the incidence and impact of violence against children.

More information about CCRC publications and activities is available from the Program Administrator.



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# **Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors: The Response of Law Enforcement**

**Acknowledgments**

**Executive Summary**

**Introduction**

**How the Study Was Conducted**

**Definition of Internet-Related**

**Arrest Estimate for Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors**

**Types of Internet Sex Crimes Against Minors**

**Internet Crimes With Identified Victims**

**Internet Solicitations to Undercover Law Enforcement**

**Internet Child Pornography**

**Characteristics of Offenders and Offenses**

**The Nature of the Child Pornography Possessed by Offenders**

**Justice-System Management of Cases**

**Case Outcomes**

**Discussion: Implications for Law Enforcement**

**References**