

SUMMARY

English summary of Brå report No 2007:11

The online sexual solicitation of children by adults in Sweden

brå

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The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention – centre for knowledge about crime and crime prevention measures.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention works to reduce crime and improve levels of safety in society by producing data and disseminating knowledge on crime and crime prevention work.

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Contents

BACKGROUND	5
RESULTS	7
MEASURES TO COMBAT THE SEXUAL SOLICITATION OF CHILDREN VIA THE INTERNET	16
REFERENCES	24

Background

The literature on sexual offending against children shows that attempts by adults to establish and develop relationships with children for the purposes of sexual exploitation are not a recent phenomenon (e.g. Martens, 1989; Grubin, 1998; Svedin, 2000; McAlinden 2006). However, the expansion in the use of the internet since the mid 1990s has created a new and for the most part completely unmonitored interface between children and adults. A very large and increasing number of children and youth use the internet to communicate with others, and the anonymity provided by the internet has been viewed as creating favourable conditions for adults intent upon establishing manipulative relationships with young people (cf. Stanley, 2001). This has led to a growing concern about the role of the internet as a tool for adults wishing to sexually exploit and abuse children and youths.

The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet – Brå) has been instructed by the Swedish government to produce a knowledge base describing the character and extent of this phenomenon in Sweden. The Council's task has also involved describing existing measures taken to combat the sexual solicitation of children via the internet, both by examining how this phenomenon has to date been dealt with in Sweden and other countries, and by considering and proposing additional measures to prevent and disrupt the sexual solicitation of children by adults.

The Internet is now an integral part of children and youths' social world

The internet has often been described in terms of a “technological tool” with many different potential “uses” – as a source of information, for example, as an open and very inclusive forum for the discussion of any subject imaginable, as a means of communication, and so on and so forth. Further, it is not uncommon even for those presenting research into online activities to make a clear distinction between events that occur in the course of internet communications, for example, and things that happen IRL (in real life).

Both this view of the internet, and the use of this terminology, however, tend to reinforce a perception that the internet can still be regarded as something quite distinct from the “real-world” society that exists offline. When it comes to young people in particular, this understanding of the internet is no longer tenable. A recent study of Swedish children's media habits conducted by the Swedish Media Council (Medierådet, 2006) found that 82 percent of nine to eleven year olds, and 95 percent of twelve to sixteen year olds use the internet, and that 28 percent and 54 percent respectively use the internet every day. Children and youth have come to integrate the internet into their everyday lives in a way that may still feel strange, and at times even incomprehensible, to many adults. Amongst other things, many children today use the internet to communicate on a more or less daily basis, and to establish and maintain relationships with other people. Furthermore, their social sphere often spans both the virtual and the non-virtual worlds without there being any clear line of demarcation between the two.

The literature on children's use of the internet has been careful to point out that it has the potential to play a very positive role in child development. In the area of relationships, for example, the internet has been described as providing previously unknown opportunities for children to learn about sexual issues that may be difficult to discuss with parents or teachers, or with anyone else for that matter, in the context of more traditional social environments (e.g. Calder, 2004). At the same time, however, there are many potential pitfalls and dangers associated with the internet. These include the supply of distorted and at times

extremely misleading information on a wide range of subjects, the easy accessibility of violent images and pornography, and the opportunities provided by the internet for new forms of bullying and sexual harassment. The presence on the internet of adults who are actively seeking contact with young people in order to sexually exploit and abuse them naturally also falls within this category. In order to safeguard the positive potential of the internet, it is therefore essential to develop an understanding of the nature of the dangers that confront young people on the internet, to stay abreast of developments in this highly changeable environment, and to work to ensure that minimising the risks faced by young people online becomes as important a priority as it is in relation to the dangers faced by children in various offline environments.

Existing knowledge on sexual solicitation via the internet prior to the National Council's study

Existing international research shows that children experience sexual contacts via the internet both from adults and from other children and youth. Exposure to such contacts is less widespread among younger children, but becomes increasingly common as children approach and enter their teenage years. Girls are exposed to this form of sexual solicitation to a greater extent than boys, and boys and men are responsible for the vast majority of these online contacts (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Wolak et al., 2006).

Research from the UK shows that sexual contacts between adults and children on the internet assume a number of different forms. In some cases the adult's goal is to arrange an offline meeting at which he can have sex with the child. In others, the adult's goal may be to achieve some more immediate form of sexual gratification by initiating a sexually exploitative relationship that is restricted to the online environment. This may take the form of attempting to persuade the child to send sexually explicit pictures, to pose in front of a web camera or to participate in cybersex (O'Connell, 2003; O'Connell et al., 2004).

In the USA, researchers have noted that an increased risk for exposure to sexual solicitation via the internet is associated with visiting chat sites, using the internet to communicate with strangers, and also with experiences of problems in a number of different areas, including psychological problems, problems at home and exposure to other forms of victimisation (Mitchell et al., 2001).

As regards offline sex crimes committed against children by perpetrators who have used the internet to establish contact with their victims, research from the USA shows that the perpetrators have often succeeded in convincing the victims that they were involved in a romantic relationship. Further, the victims of such offences had often gone to meet these perpetrators fully aware of the fact that they were much older men who wanted to have sex with them (Mitchell et al. 2005; Wolak et al., 2004).

Very little research in this area has been conducted in Sweden. The few studies that do exist show amongst other things that in 2003, 32 percent of a school sample of children aged between nine and sixteen reported that they had experienced someone talking about sex with them on the internet when they didn't want this (SAFT, 2003). In 2006, fifteen percent of a postal sample of children aged between twelve and sixteen reported having been exposed to such unwanted sexual communications (Medierådet, 2006). The same studies show that girls report exposure to experiences of this kind significantly more often than boys.

No research has previously been carried out in Sweden to illuminate the age and sex distribution of those who initiate sexual contacts with children and youth via the internet. Nor has any Swedish research been conducted into the content of sexual contacts of this kind, or into how central a role the internet

plays as a forum for such contacts by comparison with other possible means by which adults may establish contact with children for sexual purposes. There is also a complete absence of research in Sweden focusing on the question of possible factors that may characterise children at risk of becoming the object of sexual contacts from adults via the internet.

An examination of the situation in Sweden based on three data sets

Three data sets have been collected by the National Council in order to illuminate these issues.

A questionnaire survey of a nationally representative sample of 7,500 youths in their final year of compulsory education (aged fifteen) is employed to examine how common it is for young people to report experiences of sexual contacts from adults via the internet by comparison with similar contacts taken by other means. The same data are also used to study whether youths who report having been the subject of sexual contacts from adults differ from other youths as regards their experience of inter alia problems at home and in school, and their levels of exposure to other forms of victimisation.

Data from an online questionnaire survey of a (non-random) sample of 1,000 experienced internet-users aged between fifteen and seventeen is employed to illustrate various different aspects of exposure to sexual contacts via the internet within this particular sample. Amongst other things this material includes information on the age and gender of the persons who have contacted the respondents, and how these youths describe the content of the sexual contacts they have had with adults via the internet.

The third data set is comprised of police offence reports relating to sexual offences against persons under eighteen years of age, where the perpetrator and the victim have been in contact with one another via the internet. These data are employed to present a description of the breadth and variation in the types of internet-initiated sexual offences against children that are currently being brought to the attention of the Swedish police.

Results

A large number of fifteen-year-olds report having been the subject of a sexual contact from an adult over the past year

Slightly over 30 percent of the youths in the National Council's nationally representative sample of fifteen year olds reported that they had been the subject of some form of sexual contact during the twelve months prior to the survey from a previously unknown person that they knew or believed to be an adult. The proportion of girls reporting experience of contacts of this kind was much larger than the corresponding proportion of boys (48% and 18% respectively). The vast majority of those who reported having been contacted by an adult in this way answered that they had been contacted via the internet. Very few youths (approximately two percent of both boys and girls) reported having been the subject of one or more sexual contacts from adults *exclusively* offline (e.g. by mobile phone or some other means). Although there are always uncertainties involved in assessing the age of persons one has only been in contact with via the internet, these findings indicate that the internet has become by far the dominant means by which adults attempt to establish sexual contacts with children in Sweden, at least within the age group examined in this survey.

The school survey data also show that the group of youths reporting experience of sexual contacts from adults includes an over-representation of individuals who also report patterns of peer associations and behaviours that have long been viewed as constituting part of a general pattern of risk-taking behaviour

among certain groups of young people (such as drinking to the point of intoxication, drug use, and spending a lot of time with older friends). The over-representation of youths with these characteristics was found to be greatest within the group of youths who reported having been the subject of some form of sexual contact from an adult both online and offline. Self-reported problems within the family and at school, as well as reports of exposure to bullying, and to theft and violent crime were also significantly more common within this group than they were in the rest of the sample. Together these findings indicate that youths exposed to sexual contacts from adults on balance represent a relatively vulnerable group.

Substantial sex-differences in exposure to sexual contacts via the internet also found in the online survey

An invitation to participate in the National Council's online questionnaire survey was sent to Swedish youths aged 15-17 who are members of a large international online survey panel (the CPX-panel). The survey was closed once a little over 1,000 youths had completed the online questionnaire.

The results from the online survey show that Swedish children are subject to sexual contacts initiated via the internet by both adults and other children and youths. The girls in the sample report being the subject of sexual contacts more often than the boys. Almost 70 percent of the female respondents reported ever having been exposed to *unwanted* sexual contacts, and almost 50 percent reported having experienced such contacts during the twelve months prior to the survey. The girls in the sample also reported having experience of such contacts at an earlier age than their male counterparts. In response to questions about the most distressing unwanted sexual contact they had experienced, over 40 percent of the girls in the sample (comprising 70 percent of those who had been the subject of unwanted sexual contacts) reported that this contact had taken place before their fifteenth birthday.¹ The corresponding figure among the boys in the sample was eleven percent (which comprised 45 percent of those who had ever had experience of an unwanted sexual contact via the internet). The female respondents also reported having been contacted by persons who were on average significantly older than the persons who had contacted their male counterparts. By comparison with the responses from male respondents, it was also much more common for the girls to report that they had experienced these contacts as "quite distressing" or "very distressing".

In order to study various aspects of sexual internet contacts initiated specifically by adults, the youths were asked whether they had ever been the subject of a sexual contact via the internet from a person who was at least five years older than them (irrespective of whether or not they wanted this type of contact). Fifty-one percent of the girls in the sample reported having experience of a contact of this kind at some point, and 33 percent had experienced a contact of this kind prior to the age of fifteen. The corresponding figures among the male respondents were sixteen and seven percent respectively.

Respondents describe a wide variety of sexual internet contacts from adults

Follow-up questions were asked about the oldest individual whom the youths had experience of a sexual internet contact with prior to the age of fifteen. These

¹ The significance of asking about experiences prior to the age of fifteen in the current context is that this is the age of sexual consent in Sweden. The Swedish sexual offences legislation builds on the principle that children under this age can never be regarded as having consented to sexual relations, and that engaging with children under the age of fifteen in any form of sexual activity always constitutes an abuse.

questions only related to contacts with persons who were at least five years older than the respondents at the time. The youths were also given the opportunity to describe this contact in their own words. The vast majority of these contacts had been initiated by men with whom the respondents were not previously acquainted offline.

The youths described experiences of a broad range of types of sexual contacts from adults. Amongst other things, they described contacts where men had initiated sexual conversations with them, or had attempted to get them to send sexually explicit pictures of themselves. In some cases the youths had responded and had sent such pictures. In other cases, the men had attempted to get the respondents to strip or engage in sexual acts in front of a web camera, or the men had exposed themselves or masturbated in front of their own web cameras. Other men had sent the respondents unsolicited, sexually explicit pictures of themselves. It was clear from a number of the descriptions provided by the respondents that internet contacts of this type are very much an everyday experience for some children and youth.

In slightly over twenty percent of the reported incidents, the youths answered that the adult had subsequently attempted to contact them outside the internet, for example by telephone or by trying to arrange to meet them. In some cases, the adult had offered the respondent money to perform various kinds of sexual services; in other cases he had said that he simply wanted to meet “as friends”, for example, to spend time together or to maybe watch a film.

The vast majority of these contacts had been established either on Swedish language chat sites, or via the MSN-messenger instant messaging program. The latter constitutes by far the dominant instant messaging program in use among Swedish children, and allows for the use of web cameras, video conversation, and also for the sending and receiving of film sequences, pictures and other types of computer files. It also appears to constitute the medium where the vast majority of the more serious online sexual offences take place in Sweden. Once again, by comparison with the boys in the sample with experience of contacts of this kind, a substantially larger proportion of the girls had experienced them as distressing. In some cases the respondents reported that the incident had haunted them for years.

For the most part, the youths’ descriptions indicate that they had been able to deal with the online sexual contacts they had experienced from adults without ever being at any grave risk of exposure to sexual offences at an offline meeting. Many of the youths’ descriptions provided an indication of how they had dealt with the incidents, using strategies they have developed themselves, such as blocking the perpetrators and removing them from buddy lists.

A small number of the youths in the sample nonetheless described how they had been on their way to an offline meeting with, or had actually met older individuals with whom they had had sexual contacts via the internet. But none of these youths described any sexual offences having taken place at these meetings. It should be noted, however, that of the youths who reported experience of a sexual internet contact with a person at least five years their senior prior to the age of fifteen (n=200), only approximately one-third chose to provide a description of an incident of this kind.

A study of internet-initiated sexual offences against children and youth reported to the Swedish police

Primarily in order to illustrate how internet contacts between adults and children may result in sexual offences against children that take place in the context of offline meetings, the National Council collected data from police offence reports

relating to sexual offences against persons under the age of eighteen, where the perpetrator and victim had been in contact with one another via the internet. The study focuses on sexual offences reported to the police between January 2004 and September 2006, in fourteen of Sweden's twenty-one police authorities (including the country's three metropolitan areas).

The study covers a total of 315 offence reports. These were identified by means of a computerised search of the police offence report database, based on a specially formulated list of search terms, among all sexual offences against persons under eighteen years of age reported to the relevant police authorities. A computerised search of this kind is only able to identify cases where the offence description included in the initial police report includes information indicating that the perpetrator and victim have been in contact via the internet. This offence description is written at the time when a crime is first reported to the police, and the length and detail of these offence descriptions vary greatly. In addition, they do not contain information (e.g. on possible internet contacts between perpetrator and victim) that only emerges at a later stage in the police investigation. Thus the material will not include all of the offences of the relevant type that have actually been reported to the police authorities included in the study.

In cases where the offence description showed that an offence had been committed in the context of an offline meeting between perpetrator and victim, or where there was a suspicion that a sexual offence *may have been* committed at such a meeting, documentation from the police's investigation into the reported offence was requested from the police authority in question, including transcripts of interviews with the crime victims.

The victims were under fifteen years of age in slightly over 70 percent of the reported incidents, and they were under thirteen years in 32 percent of the incidents. The vast majority (92%) were girls. All of the persons identified and linked to the offences as suspects were males, although in a small number of the incidents where the reported offences had been restricted to contacts via the internet, the victim had reported that the perpetrator was a woman.

Over 50 percent of the reported incidents relate to contacts that were restricted to the internet

Of the 315 offence reports included in the study, 179 relate to sexual contacts that were restricted to internet communications between a victim and a person not previously known to this victim. For the most part, these offences took the form of contacts very similar to those described by the respondents in the online questionnaire survey. Most common among them were contacts where the perpetrator had: 1) posed sexual questions, made sexually abusive remarks or in some other way initiated a sexual conversation with the child via the internet; 2) attempted to persuade, or actually persuaded, the child to pose in front of a web camera in a state of partial or complete undress; and 3) exposed himself and/or masturbated in front of the child via a web camera.

In some instances, however, the offences were of a much more serious character than the great majority of those reported in the online survey. The offence reports included, for example, descriptions of cases where children had first been persuaded to undress in front of a web camera, and where the perpetrator had then saved the images, and used the threat of publishing these images to blackmail the child to send more sexually explicit pictures, or to participate in sexual acts in front of her web camera. Other cases related to contacts that had continued for several months, in which girls aged between ten and thirteen had been paid to strip in front of a web camera, or to participate in webcamsex with the perpetrator, on a number of different occasions. There were also cases where the perpetrator had first paid the child a few times, then moved on to the use of

blackmail, and had finally published naked images of the child on the internet anyway.

In approximately ten percent of these cases where the sexual contact had been restricted to the internet, the perpetrator had expressed a desire to meet and/or have sex with the victim offline. On occasion the perpetrator had used blackmail (as described above) to attempt to manipulate the child into attending an offline meeting. On other occasions the perpetrator had offered to pay for a train or bus ticket so that the child could travel to meet him in another town. In a number of these cases the request for a meeting followed a period of contact over the internet which lasted several weeks or even months, with these internet contacts often having included various sexual elements, such as the perpetrator masturbating in front of the child, or having sent pornographic pictures or film clips to the child.

Many of the reported offences relate to incidents where the offender had succeeded in extending the contact into the offline environment

In almost 40 percent of the reported incidents, a perpetrator who had been unknown to the victim prior to the internet contact had succeeded in extending the contact outside the internet. The victims in these cases had often given out their telephone numbers having spent some time “chatting” innocently with someone they believed to be of roughly the same age as themselves. The offenders had then often attempted to persuade the child to participate in telephone sex, or had harassed the child with sexual text messages or by sending sexual images to the child’s mobile phone. In some cases these mobile phone contacts included offers of money for the child to perform sexual services at an offline meeting, and on occasion these contacts had continued for upwards of a year before finally being reported to the police.

These offence reports also included a number of cases where the child had been on his or her way to a meeting or had actually met the perpetrator offline, but where the documentation included in the study did not provide evidence that a sexual offence had been committed at such a meeting. In some cases, this was due to the fact that the children involved had changed their minds at the last minute, and had left the arranged meeting place without making themselves known to the perpetrator. In one such case for example, a fourteen year old girl had been in contact via e-mail with a man in his late twenties who had offered to pay her to meet him for sex. The girl agreed, but changed her mind at the last minute once she saw the perpetrator at the arranged meeting place. The perpetrator was later identified and arrested, and the police investigation showed he had made similar offers to at least twenty other young girls in different parts of Sweden.

In a number of the cases, where the child had actually met the perpetrator offline, there were strong suspicions on the part of the person reporting the offence (which in these cases was always one of the victim’s parents), that the perpetrator had in fact had sex with the victim. The following two examples are typical, but are based on elements drawn from a number of different cases. The children involved were aged 12–13 at the time the offence reports were filed, the perpetrators were between 30 and 40 years of age.

A man has been in contact with a young girl via the internet, mobile telephone conversations and text messages for over two years. At the time of the first internet contact he presented himself as a child. Since this point the girl has fallen in love with him and now knows he is much older than herself. Over the course of the two years, the girl’s parents have been in contact with the man on several occasions and have attempted – without success – to persuade him to break off contacts with their daughter. Amongst other things the man has rented

a room near the place where the girl was living, and has fetched her there. The girl has stated that the relationship is not sexual. The girl's father is very concerned that the man has been sexually intimate with his daughter.

Another young girl has had repeated internet contacts with a man who amongst other things has made sexually explicit remarks about the girl's appearance. The man has booked and paid for a trip so that the girl could visit him for two days in another part of Sweden. The girl told her mother that she would be staying over at a friend's house on the days in question. When it later emerges where she has actually been, the girl says that she and the man have not had sex, but that he is her boyfriend and is nice to her. The girl's mother strongly suspects that the man has sexually exploited her daughter.

Over 20 percent of the reported incidents involve a sexual offence committed in the context of an offline meeting

Slightly over twenty percent of the police offence reports relate to a sexual offence that had been committed at an offline meeting by a perpetrator who had been unknown to the victim prior to the internet contact. The material contains a total of 69 reports relating to offences of this type. In almost one fifth of these cases (13 offence reports), the victims and perpetrators were of roughly the same age (with the offender on average being just over two years older than the victim). These offences had for the most part been committed when the victim met the perpetrator outside the internet for the first time, often in connection with some form of night out or party attended by friends of both the victim and the perpetrator.

In the remaining cases, three central methods have been identified that were used by adult offenders to persuade the victims to meet them.

"Friendship" and "romance"

In 29 cases, the perpetrator had, first via the internet, and then in most cases also by means of mobile telephone contact, become friends with the victim or had manipulated the victim into falling in love with him. The victims in these cases were for the most part under fifteen years of age at the time the offences were reported, and all but one were girls. The perpetrators were aged between seventeen (one case) and 44 years. In slightly over one-third of these cases, the offender was at least twenty years older than the victim.

The length of the initial internet contact varied a great deal, and in a few cases had continued for up to 2–3 years prior to the commission of the reported offline offence. In the majority of these cases, the victim's parents had not been aware of the contacts until after the victim had met the perpetrator and the reported offence had been committed. The victims had often travelled to another town or city in order to meet the offender, and had told their parents they would be sleeping over at a friend's house, for example. In some cases the children knew they were going to have sex with the adult prior to the meeting, and in almost one-quarter of the cases described in this group of offence reports, the victim had met the perpetrator for sex on at least two occasions. In other cases, the victims had been forced to have intercourse and to engage in other sex acts, and have described in police interviews that they had been shocked by the perpetrator's behaviour.

Promising the victim work as a model

Seven of the offence reports describe cases where the victims (all of whom were girls aged between thirteen and seventeen) were manipulated into meeting the perpetrator with a promise of work as a model. The perpetrators in these cases

were aged between 23 and 62 years. In one case, the victim had replied to an internet advertisement about a modelling job. In the remaining cases, the victims had been contacted, either via chat sites, MSN-messenger or by e-mail, by perpetrators who had seen photographs that the victims had themselves published on the internet.

In the initial stages of the contact, the perpetrators had first been very flattering about the girls' photographs, and had then moved on to very convincing descriptions of their own experiences from the modelling industry, where they claimed for the most part to work as professional photographers. These internet contacts continued for anything from a few days to up to two months prior to the victims meeting the men offline. With a single exception, the perpetrators had promised the victims that the modelling assignment would not involve them being photographed naked.

As a rule, the perpetrators continued to be convincing in their role as photographers and the like in the initial stages of these meetings. In a typical case, the victim would first be photographed with her clothes on, and would then be asked to undress. The perpetrator began to sexually assault the victim by means of unwanted sexual touching, which he might explain as being necessary to correct the girl's poses. In the majority of cases, the sexual assault did not go any further than this sexual touching, often because the victim succeeded in getting away from the perpetrator. In two cases, however, the adult had forced the victim to have intercourse with him.

Offers of payment for sexual services

Nine of the police reports relating to offences committed in connection with an offline meeting between the perpetrator and the victim involved men who had offered the victims money to provide various forms of sexual services. The victims in these cases comprised males and females aged between fourteen and seventeen years. The perpetrators were aged between 25 and 49. In a couple of cases the internet contacts between victim and perpetrator had been very short, while the majority had continued for between one month and up to 3–4 months prior to the offline meeting. Five of the victims had travelled to another town or city to meet the perpetrator, and in five cases, the victim had met the adult for sex on two or more occasions.

One of the sexual offences in this group of offence reports involved sexual touching, while in the remainder of cases the victims had either performed oral sex on the perpetrator (2 cases) or had sexual intercourse. In over half of the cases, the victims, upon meeting the perpetrators, had been forced to engage in sexual acts that they did not wish to perform, and which they had not agreed upon in advance. It was also often the case that the victim and perpetrator had agreed prior to the meeting that the perpetrator would use a condom. In virtually all cases however, the victims were then either persuaded or forced to have unprotected sex with the perpetrators.

Offences where the victim had been contacted via the internet by an adult prior acquaintance

Seven percent of the sexual offences reported to the police (22 offence reports) related to cases where an adult who was already an offline acquaintance of the victim had used internet communications to sexualise or maintain a sexual element in their relationship. In almost half of these cases, the offender had already subjected the child to some form of sexual offence prior to the internet contact. As was the case in a similar study conducted in the USA (Mitchell et al., 2005), the nature of the pre-existing relationships between offenders and victims varied. In two cases the perpetrator was related to the victim, and in one case was the

victim's mother's ex-boyfriend. Other groups found among the perpetrators included staff at the victim's school or sports club, or who worked with other forms of organised youth activities, and persons who lived in the victim's neighbourhood or whom the victim had come into contact with through friends. Two of the perpetrators were public transport employees who had initiated contact with the victim's on bus journeys.

Some of these police reports refer to cases where the sexual element in the relationship had been restricted to the internet. In other cases, the perpetrator had sexually assaulted the victim at an offline meeting that took place subsequent to the internet contact.

Pre-existing problems in various areas common among those subjected to offline sexual offences

In many of the cases where the perpetrator had committed a sexual offence against the victim in connection with an offline meeting, there are clear signs in the police-interview material that the victims were experiencing sometimes quite serious problems in other areas of their lives. They had often had problems with ongoing bullying at school, or had difficulties at home, and they often spoke of having felt a need to talk to someone about these problems. In other cases, the victims had previously been in contact with the psychiatric care sector or the social services, and a small number of the girls had previously been institutionalised by means of compulsory care orders. In many cases these problems appear to have produced a special vulnerability among the victims, which was then exploited by the perpetrators. The material relating to the "friendship" and "romance" cases, for example, showed that in the initial stages of these contacts, the perpetrators had been very understanding, and they were most often described by the victims as having (initially at least) been both "kind" and "considerate".

A stark contrast between the child's sense of safety during the internet contact and the offline meeting respectively

In the police interviews, the victims subjected to offline sexual assaults sometimes described how they, prior to meeting the perpetrator, had spoken to friends who had advised them against going to the meeting. Some stated further that they knew it was dangerous to meet older persons they had come into contact with on the internet. By this time, however, they had nonetheless felt that they really knew the man in question, and that he was such a nice person that they didn't believe it could be dangerous to meet him.

A common element in the material relating to offline incidents where the child had then been forced to have sex with the perpetrator against his or her will was that the children describe that when they met the men, they felt more or less straight away that there was something about the situation that made them feel uncomfortable or afraid. At the same time, they didn't know how they could extract themselves from the situation in which they found themselves. This feeling of helplessness was in part due to the fact that the men were so much older, bigger and stronger than themselves – the children often stated that they were afraid that the man might become angry or violent if they didn't do as he wanted them to, even if he hadn't expressly threatened them. In many cases, however, the children were also faced with a sudden insight into how isolated they were from people who might be able to help them. These children had most commonly snuck out of the house, run away, or lied to their parents about where they were going, and they had often agreed to meet the perpetrator in another town, which they weren't familiar with, and where there was nobody they could turn to for help. A reading of the police interviews conducted with these victims provides a powerful insight into the stark contrast between the situation preced-

ing the offline assault, where a child sits at home in his or her own room, chatting or flirting with an older man in a virtual world that is permeated by the sense of safety and familiarity associated with the child's home environment, and the extremely isolated and exposed situation in which the sexual assault later takes place.

A pyramid-like phenomenon

When they are viewed in combination, the picture that emerges from the three data sets collected by the National Council is one of a phenomenon that can be likened to a pyramid. The broad base of this pyramid is made up of a very large number of attempts made by adults to contact children and youth via the internet for the purpose of sexually exploiting these young individuals. Of these many attempted contacts, it is those where the perpetrator wants to commit an act that requires a lower degree of complicity or participation on the part of the victim that appear most likely to be "successful". Examples of acts of this kind include sexual harassment or molestation by means of chat messages, and exposing oneself to a child via a web camera. For the commission of offences of this kind, all that is required of the victims is that they agree for example to "add" the perpetrator to their MSN-messenger buddy list or to open the webcam window in their browser. Further up towards the top of the pyramid we find sexual harassment and the like perpetrated via the victim's mobile phone, where the victim must first be persuaded to give the perpetrator his or her telephone number, and offences which involve the child posing naked in front of a web camera. These require a more active participation on the part of the victim, and by comparison with offences involving the perpetrator exposing himself via a web camera, for example, these forms of sexual abuse may be assumed to require more extensive preparatory work on the part of the perpetrator to ensure the victim's complicity. At the top of the pyramid we find the sexual assaults that can only be committed once the victim has actually agreed to an offline meeting with the perpetrator.

A selection process similar to other cyberphenomena

The National Council's data sets together suggest a victim selection process that is as follows. The internet provides adult sex offenders with access to a more or less unlimited number of children and youths. Certain of these young people are more vulnerable in the face of these contacts than others, as a result of such factors as varying levels of knowledge and experience of the internet, and also a number of different background, psychological and social factors. The more children a perpetrator attempts to contact, the higher the probability that he will come into contact with a child who is vulnerable to precisely the type of strategy that he has chosen to use. As far as the perpetrator is concerned, we may assume that it makes little difference which of the children he contacts that react positively to his approaches. Instead he exploits the fact that certain children have characteristics that will lead them to "self-select" as victims. In this way, the sexual solicitation of children by adults via the internet is very reminiscent of other cybercrime phenomena, such as "phishing", for example, or begging letters sent by e-mail in the form of spam.

Measures to combat the sexual solicitation of children via the internet

Important to minimise the risks children and youth are exposed to on the internet

The research conducted by the National Council shows that a very large number of Swedish children and youth have at some point been contacted via the internet by adults intent on sexually exploiting them in some way. The participants in the Council's online questionnaire survey described many incidents where adults have subjected them to a variety of types of online sexual abuse. These incidents often caused distress, and in some cases a great deal of distress, to those who experienced them. The study of sexual offences reported to the police also shows that a large number of children and youth have over the past two to three years been subjected to various forms of offline sexual assault by adults with whom they came into contact in cyberspace. Furthermore, we know that the dark figure in relation to sexual offences against children tends to be very large,² and it is very likely that the method employed to identify relevant offence reports has missed a substantial number of the cases that have actually been brought to the attention of the police. It is therefore safe to assume that the actual number of children exposed to offences of this kind during the period examined by the study is substantially larger than the number of cases identified in the National Council's computerised search of the police offence report database.

Four areas of special interest for crime prevention work to combat the sexual solicitation of children via the internet

From a crime prevention perspective, the arrival of the internet has produced major changes in what is usually referred to as the "opportunity structure" for adults who want to establish contacts with children and youth in order to sexually exploit them. Furthermore, the internet is difficult to monitor and constitutes a highly fluid and changeable environment. Situations of this kind often present a major challenge to the work of crime prevention. On the basis of the work that has already been done, particularly internationally, to identify different means of meeting these challenges, the National Council's view is that measures in four central areas should be attended to as a point of departure for a more long term crime prevention strategy to combat the sexual solicitation of children by adults via the internet:

- Systematic educational and informational measures directed at children, youth, parents and the public.
- Opportunities for internet industry actors to combat this phenomenon
- New legislation against contacts with children for sexual purposes
- Police work focused on detecting and investigating offences

In order to co-ordinate preventive strategies across these different areas, to adapt them to Swedish conditions and to monitor their implementation, some form of central co-ordinatory organisation is also required. This organisation could also serve as a central assembly point for the existing knowledge and experience relating to this phenomenon that is today distributed across a number of different organisations (including among others the police, the social services and children's charities), thereby providing a sound foundation for the formulation and

² International estimates suggest that the proportion of sexual offences against children that are actually reported to the police may be as low as between three and twelve percent (see e.g. McAlinden, 2006).

development of long-term crime prevention strategies that remain sensitive to ongoing and future changes in the communicational environment of young people.

Educational measures for children

Education on internet safety constitutes a means of *empowering* children and youth by providing them with the knowledge and tools they need to assume control over their experiences of the internet and in particular of their internet communications with other people.³ Internationally, a number of scientific evaluations of educational programmes have been published, with results that indicate that these programmes have had a positive impact on children's attitudes towards various risk behaviours on the internet.⁴

Informational and educational material on safer internet use has been developed and published by a number of organisations and public sector agencies in Sweden. Researchers working on the evaluation of an internet safety project in schools in London have warned however of the limitations of informational campaigns that require children, parents, or teachers to actively seek out and access this information themselves (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2004). These warnings find support in the results from the National Council's online questionnaire survey (where the respondents were asked whether they had received such information and if so from where), which indicate that efforts to disseminate the information contained in the materials produced in Sweden to the children who actually need it have to date been largely unsuccessful.

There are clearly limitations as to what can be achieved by means of educational efforts alone, and it important to be realistic about what they might accomplish (cf. O'Connell, 2004), but on the basis of the "selection model" described above, they may at least be expected to have an effect on those incidents of exposure to sexual solicitation that are the result of the victims' inexperience of online communication or ignorance of the possible risks associated with communicating with others via the internet. This may in turn have a double effect, both by means of a direct reduction in the number of (particularly younger) children being exposed to various forms of sexual solicitation via the internet, and by making the internet a less profitable environment for adult sex offenders.

The school system would appear to provide a natural medium for the purpose of reaching as many children as possible. Of the youths who participated in the National Council's online survey, however, almost 70 percent reported that they had not been taught anything about internet safety in school. Of those youth who had been given lessons on internet safety, half answered that they felt they had not been taught enough.

Existing research on the extent and character of internet use among children, together with the National Council's studies on adults' internet contacts with children for the purposes of sexual exploitation, leave little doubt as to the urgency of the situation. In order to achieve the goal of empowering children and youths to assume control of their experiences of the internet, it is important that educational programmes start early and that they are adapted to age differences in the target groups' circumstances and previous experience of communication via the internet. In order to correspond to the lived-reality of today's children and young people, the long-term goal should be that of *integrating* information on safe internet use into school work on amongst other things relationships,

³ See e.g. O'Connell, 2004

⁴ See e.g. Crombie & Trinneer, 2003; Davidson & Martellozzo, 2004; Chibnall et al., 2006.

sexuality, bullying, harassment and sexual abuse, rather than simply treating internet safety as a separate “subject”.

Possibilities for reaching high-risk children and youth

Many of the children and youths who are most vulnerable to adults’ attempts at sexual solicitation via the internet may, as a result of precisely those social and psychological characteristics that make them vulnerable, be difficult to influence by means of traditional educational measures. This problem has also been noted by researchers in the USA, who have therefore argued that practitioners who come into contact with troubled youth in the context of their routine work, need to be aware that these young people may use high-risk internet contacts as a means of coping with negative feelings associated with a poor self-image, for example, exposure to bullying or feelings of loneliness.⁵ They argue further that questions on internet use ought therefore to be included as a matter of course when assessing troubled youths’ problems and the nature of their needs.

Information to parents

Parents constitute an important resource for the purposes of educating children on the risks associated with apparently friendly contacts with people they have met on the internet. Parents are often less knowledgeable about the internet than their children however. Further, a study conducted by the Swedish Media Council (Medierådet, 2006) shows that very few Swedish parents of children who had experienced unwanted sexual chat contacts were aware of their children’s experiences, and the findings from the National Council’s study of reported sexual offences showed that in the majority of cases, the victims’ parents had not been aware of their children’s communications with the perpetrators until after the offences had been committed. Parents need therefore to be made aware of the risks associated with children’s communications with others via the internet, and also of how children may be manipulated into becoming complicitous in their exposure to sex crimes at the hands of adults.⁶

Information to the public

Internationally, a need has been identified to clarify for the public that acts that constitute a breach of penal legislation when they are committed offline, are also covered by the same legislation when they are committed via the internet. In Norway, for example, a Government Bill⁷ currently before parliament intended to criminalise meeting a child with the intention of committing a sexual offence includes an additional proposal stating that it should be clarified that the existing legislation against sexually abusive and other indecent behaviour also covers behaviours that are committed by means of electronic communication. The Canadian Centre for Innovation Law and Policy (CILP, 2005) has also argued that governments should establish state-financed websites which provide information on the types of behaviour that are illegal when engaged in online.

Information to the public may also constitute a means of assisting the agencies of law enforcement in the work of investigating and prosecuting internet related sexual offences against children. A report from a European conference on how best to work to protect children online⁸ proposes that a description of the information required by the police to effectively respond to reports of child sex-

⁵ Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2004

⁶ See also Centre for Innovation Law and Policy (CILP), 2005.

⁷ Odelstingsproposisjon nr. 18 (2006-2007).

⁸ Virtual Global Taskforce, 2005.

ual abuse online should be made available to the public, together with information on the steps internet users themselves can take to secure this information.

One means of systematically reaching out with information both to parents, on the risks that children are exposed to in association with internet communications, and to the public regarding amongst other things the types of online behaviour that constitute offences against penal legislation, would be to encourage internet service providers to include this information in circulars sent to their subscribers.

Other opportunities for the internet industry to combat the phenomenon

In the UK, the Home Office Taskforce on Child Protection on the Internet has published guidelines regarding what should be regarded as “good practice” among companies providing various forms of online chat services, and also instant messaging programs (such as MSN-messenger).⁹ These guidelines describe a number of measures required to provide children with the protection they require when using these services. Amongst other things, companies providing chat services are encouraged to provide clear and prominent safety messages both on the sites’ front page and inside the chatrooms themselves, including information on whether or not the chatroom is monitored. Users should be able to limit the information in their chat profiles that is made available to others, and children in particular should be encouraged not to post their telephone numbers, or their home or e-mail addresses. Safety tools should be made available, including advice on how to deal with abusive chatters, buttons to enable users to report abuse, and also to block abusive chatters, so that their messages are no longer visible on the user’s computer screen.

In a study financed by the Home Office, Sheridan & Boon (2005) conducted an evaluation of the extent to which the proposals included in the Taskforce guidelines had been implemented by companies providing instant messaging programs and chat services. One year after the publication of the guidelines the study found that the majority of chat service providers had introduced the proposed safety tools, even though there was considerable room for improvement in how safety messages and tools had been formulated in many cases. In the case of companies providing instant messaging services, virtually all of those included in the study had introduced the proposed safety measures.

In Sweden, a trade organisation was established in 1996 for firms that produce and provide various forms of online content and services (Branschföreningen för innehålls- och tjänsteleverantörer på onlinemarknaden i Sverige – BitoS). In 2003, BitoS established an ethics council, which has since formulated guidelines that are in many ways similar to those published by the UK Taskforce.

Amongst other things, internet sites affiliated with BitoS’ ethics council have introduced what is known as the “Stop Button”, which enables the user to report content perceived to be offensive or inappropriate. All sites using the “Stop Button” have introduced standardised routines for responding to reports, which include fixed response times for dealing with different types of report, and have also established contacts with law enforcement agencies.

At the present time, however, relatively few of the many smaller Swedish internet chat sites are affiliated with BitoS’ ethics council. Furthermore, there is no easily accessible, centralised information online as to which sites have introduced the “Stop Button” or follow the ethics council’s guidelines in other areas, or which would otherwise give children and parents a reasonable basis for judging which chat sites may be regarded as relatively well-monitored and which should be avoided. For parents wishing to discuss with their children which chat

⁹ Home Office, 2003.

sites are okay to visit, or who want to make use of filtering or blocking software, it is essential that such information is collated, made available and then regularly updated.

Another possibility in this area would be to build on the work already carried out by BitoS' ethics council, by introducing some form of certification system, where the introduction of specified safety tools constituted a requirement for certification (cf. CILP 2005). As a means of increasing pressure on those sites who continue to choose not to introduce the specified child-protection measures, a certification system of this kind could then constitute the point of departure for attempts to encourage firms that advertise on the internet to refuse to pay for adverts on uncertified sites.

Internationally, concerns have been raised that there may be a number of serious problems associated with attempts to provide for children's needs for online protection by means of self-regulation that is dependent exclusively on the goodwill of companies providing various internet services. One example is found in the conflict between the interest many chat sites have in collecting information from young users, that can then be used for the purpose of marketing goods and services directed at this group of consumers, and the child-protection interest of collecting no more information from users than is essential when children register for membership of a given site. This type of self-regulation may also produce a situation where actors that voluntarily comply with safety codes and guidelines place themselves at a competitive disadvantage in relation to those who make no attempt to follow such codes.

In this context, children's charities in the UK have argued that actors who choose not to follow safety guidelines often feel that they do not have to make any effort in this regard since they believe that governments will continue to be disinclined to attempt to regulate such a changeable environment by means of legislation. The charities argue further that there is a conflict between the democratic state's task of overseeing the internet industry on behalf of the wider public interest, whilst at the same time being so heavily dependent on technical advice provided by the same industry. They argue therefore that in order to be able to discuss safety problems and possible countermeasures on more equal terms, governments need to develop and maintain their own sources of knowledge and expertise, that are separate from and independent of the internet industry itself.¹⁰

New legislation to combat the sexual solicitation of children via the internet

As a result of the changes in the opportunity structure that the expansion of the internet has produced for adults wanting to commit sexual offences against children, a number of countries have noted a need to introduce legislation with the objective of providing legal protection for children *before* they are subjected to some form of sexual assault.

New legislation in this area has been introduced in several countries, although the forms taken by this legislation vary somewhat. In some cases, legislators have chosen to criminalise communications with the objective of committing a sexual offence by means of specific technologies. Examples include Canada, for example, where it has been an offence since 2002 to communicate with a child via a computer system (such as the internet) in order to commit a sexual offence against the child.¹¹ Similar legislation has been introduced in Florida in the USA,¹² for example, and in Queensland, Australia.¹³

¹⁰ CHIS, 2005.

¹¹ Canadian Criminal Code, Part 5 Section 172.1; "Luring a child"

¹² Florida Statutes, Section 847.0135(3); "Use of a computer to seduce a child over the internet"

¹³ Queensland Criminal Code, Section 218A; "Using Internet etc. to procure children under 16"

In the UK, legislation has instead been introduced to criminalise *meeting a child following sexual grooming*.¹⁴ In order to be convicted for this offence, an offender who has already met, or communicated, with a child on at least two occasions, must meet, or start a journey with the objective of meeting, a child with the intention of committing a sexual offence against the child. It makes no difference however where or by what means the prior two meetings or contacts have taken place. Thus it is not *contacts* with a child with the purpose of facilitating a sexual offence that have been criminalised in the UK, and criminal liability does not apply until the adult actually embarks upon a journey to *meet* the child (i.e. offline) with the intention of committing a sexual offence. A similar piece of legislation has been introduced in New Zealand,¹⁵ and a Government Bill proposing an addition to the penal code along the same lines has recently been placed before the Norwegian parliament.¹⁶

In 2006, the Swedish Justice Minister instructed the Prosecutor General to conduct a review of the Swedish legislation in this area, and to assess whether this legislation was sufficient to protect children against adults' attempts to solicit them for sexual purposes. If this was not deemed to be the case, the Prosecutor General was instructed to propose any legislative changes deemed necessary. The new legislation now being proposed as a result of the Prosecutor General's inquiry has the objective of criminalising *contacts* with children under the age of fifteen, where the object of the contact is to commit a sexual offence against the child.¹⁷

Unlike the Canadian legislation described above, the proposed Swedish legislation is neutral in terms of where and by what means the contact between the adult and the child takes place. This was deemed necessary, amongst other things to avoid the inconsistencies that would arise if contacts of this kind that took place via the internet were criminalised, whilst similar contacts established in the context of the family, for example, or youth organisations, remained unaffected by the legislation.

Unlike the British legislation, the Swedish proposal has the objective of criminalising the adult's behaviour at the point where the adult establishes contact with the child for the purpose of committing a sexual offence. The proposed legislation would thus also criminalise contacts with the purpose of committing sexual offences against children that are restricted to the context of online communications, such as persuading a child to strip in front of a web camera, for example, or offering a child payment to participate in cybersex. Children in countries where the legislation is focused only on offline meetings still lack legal protection against contacts of this kind.

It should be noted that at the current time, the proposed Swedish legislation has yet to go through the standard consultation and review process that will precede its presentation to parliament in the form of a concrete proposal for legislative change.

Police methods to detect and investigate offences

Offences that are committed by means of electronic communication involve a number of specific challenges to the work of law enforcement agencies, not least in relation to the identification of suspects and the securing of the evidence re-

¹⁴ Sexual Offences Act, Section 15; "Meeting a child following sexual grooming etc."

¹⁵ Crimes Act Section 131B

¹⁶ Odelstingsproposisjon nr. 18 (2006-2007); "Om lov om endringer i straffeloven 1902 mv. (straffebud om å møte et barn med forsett om å begå seksuelt overgrep mv.)"

¹⁷ The findings of the Prosecutor General's inquiry have been published in Swedish in a Departmental Memorandum (DS 2007:13) entitled *Vuxnas sexuella kontakter med barn i sexuella syften* (Adults' contacts with children for sexual purposes).

quired to ensure a conviction. This is naturally also the case in relation to sexual offences that are committed or initiated via the internet. Amongst other things, these offences may be committed over substantial geographical distances, with a single perpetrator potentially having criminal contacts with children both throughout Sweden and also in other countries. This produces a need for systematic strategies for information-sharing and for the co-ordination of intelligence and investigative work across the geographical boundaries that otherwise delimit the operations of individual police authorities in relation to much offline offending.

The above mentioned inquiry conducted by the Swedish Prosecutor General notes that the work of the Swedish police could be expanded to include certain types of provocative measures in order to improve the opportunities available to law enforcement agencies to identify and secure evidence against suspected internet sex offenders. An awareness of the active presence of Swedish police officers on internet chat sites, for example, would also send a message to potential offenders that internet contacts with children for illegal purposes always involve the risk of an immediate response from the agencies of law enforcement.

A central organisation to develop and co-ordinate measures to combat adults contacting children for sexual purposes

In order to develop and co-ordinate concrete strategies across the various areas described above, to adapt these strategies to Swedish conditions, and to monitor their implementation, the National Council's view is that some form of central co-ordinatory body is also required.

In many ways, we have waited too long to make a serious attempt to develop a comprehensive picture of, and to initiate systematic strategies intended to combat, the way the internet has come to be used by adults intent upon sexually exploiting and abusing children. It is important to work to ensure that this mistake is not repeated in connection with ongoing and future changes in children's communicational environment. The organisation should therefore also be assigned the task of following developments, and of identifying areas where knowledge is required, or where there may be a need for new legislation or regulation in the future. To this end, the organisation should also work to stay abreast of developments in other countries, particularly within the EU, and could thereby also serve as a central contact point for international collaborations in this field.

It would be of substantial benefit to the work of combating internet-related sexual offending against children if the organisation responsible for co-ordinating preventive measures brought together representatives from the various agencies, organisations and industries that today have knowledge and experience of this phenomenon, and also technical expertise regarding the communicational tools that are used by children and young people. By bringing together existing knowledge and experience in this way, the organisation would also be able to meet the needs of both the public and the justice system by providing a "one-stop-shop" for the dissemination of information and advice.

It is not entirely clear what the ideal form would be for an organisation with these objectives. One possibility would be to attach the organisation to an existing agency, such as the police, for example. A solution of this kind has been chosen in the UK, where the *Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre* (CEOP) was established in 2006. The CEOP is at heart a law enforcement agency with police powers, which amongst other things provides regional police authorities with expertise and support in connection with ongoing investigations. At the same time, however, the agency's work ranges over a number of other areas, and includes, for example, educational efforts aimed at protecting children

from sexual offenders, and particularly those who make use of the internet and other new communications technologies, as well as efforts designed to improve child-safety technologies in the online environment.

An alternative approach would be to establish a temporary co-ordinatory organisation, which had the task of formulating a concrete long-term strategy for crime prevention work in this area on the basis of existing knowledge and experience, and of proposing a suitable organisational structure for both the implementation of this strategy and the ongoing work of adapting the strategy to meet new needs that may arise in connection with future technological developments.

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