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A Typology of Offenders Who Use Online Communications to Commit Sex Crimes Against Minors

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This study aims to present a qualitative, empirically based typology of offenders who use online communications to commit sex crimes against minors, including offenders who met victims online and those who knew them in advance. Seventy-five reports made by law enforcement officers were analyzed using a qualitative software program, during which a typology defining 4 types of offenders was identified: the expert, the cynical, the affection-focused, and the sex-focused. Each type of offender was characterized by patterns of online communication, offline and online identity, relationship dynamics with the victim, and level of sex crime expertise. The typology reveals the heterogeneous nature of sex offenders who use online communications. This diversity must be addressed to provide satisfactory interventions for both victims and offenders.

KEYWORDS adolescent, Internet crimes, offender/perpetrator, sexual abuse

Online offenders are defined as those using the “Internet and related digital technologies . . . to contact potential child victims to create opportunities for sexual offending” (Seto, Hanson, & Babchishin, 2011, p. 125). They are often stereotyped in the media, mostly as adult molesters, experts in seducing

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innocent children to sexually assault them (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Portraying such online offenders in black-and-white terms and generalizing them as strangers who are predatory pedophiles might be a way for the community to create distance from these offenders to remain emotionally and physically intact (Jewkes, 2010). Although this image might be true of a subset of offenders, it is not accurate in most cases. Research concerning the phenomenon of online sexual offences proves this view is generally biased and incorrect (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004). The reality about online child sexual offenders tends to be much more complex (Jewkes, 2010; Wolak et al., 2004).

Findings from the three-wave National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV) Study (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012) indicate that the typical scenario involving online offenders includes several common characteristics. Offenders are usually adult males, younger than 26, and mostly White, who contact potential underage victims online to seduce them into sexual relationships. The victims of online offenders are usually young female adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15. In most cases the adolescent knows the offender's identity and understands that the offender has sexual intentions. The offender might groom the victim or pretend to have a romantic relationship, when in reality he is only interested in a sexual encounter. When victims actually meet offenders offline, they usually anticipate these encounters will be sexual. The sexual relationships that develop in these cases are characterized as nonforcible. Convicted offenders are usually charged with statutory rape, and many of the victims have close relationships or report that they are in love with offenders. Online offenders, as opposed to common beliefs, are generally not pedophiles, because they target adolescents rather than young children. They also do not tend to be violent, impulsive, have histories of violence (Walsh & Wolak, 2005; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2004, 2009, 2012), or have criminal records (Seto et al., 2011).

Several typologies of online offenders have been created (for review, see Aslan, 2011; Beech, Elliott, Birgden, & Findlater, 2008). These typologies raise the question of whether online offenders are a distinct group or have the same characteristics as offline offenders and simply use technology as an additional offense technique (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Jewkes, 2010). Another question is whether it is possible to differentiate between online and offline offenders when the use of online technology has become so widespread and common in everyday life. In other words, is isolating online offenders as a group beneficial? This question is still under debate, with some studies claiming that the crimes committed by online sex offenders who use the Internet to meet or communicate with victims generally involve statutory rape and do not differ from such crimes committed by offline offenders (Wolak et al., 2004, 2009). Yet others point to some distinctions between online and offline offenders, such as online

offenders being younger, having more psychological difficulties, and having fewer previous sexual convictions than offline child molesters (Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007).

The existing typologies offer several different classifications of online offenders. The most common classification differentiates offenders who use the Internet to locate victims with the aim of offline sexual encounters from those who engage only in online sexual interactions. For example, Briggs, Simon, and Simonsen (2011) compared “contact-driven” offenders to “fantasy-driven” offenders. Some typologies include offenders who combine both contact relationships and child pornography offenses (e.g., Alexy, Burgess, & Baker, 2005). Another classification relates to expertise in offending. This includes factors such as level of sophistication using online communications, and level of security in concealing online activities (e.g., Krone, 2004). Another typology, identified by Craissati (cited in Aslan, 2011), includes offenders’ level of offline social competency.

Although the literature suggests a variety of typologies, it should be noted that only a relatively small portion of the online offender typologies are based on current empirical data, whereas others rely on literature review, clinical observations, and opinions. Most of the typologies are focused around particular aspects of the online offending and so do not take into account other aspects such as motivation, background characteristics, and the dynamics of relationships with the victims.

The Internet has become a central component in children and youth’s close and romantic relationships (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). Consequently, practitioners and prevention experts need to understand the diversity among the offenders who use the Internet to victimize minors. They must also understand the dynamics between offenders and their victims to ensure adequate interventions for both victims and offenders. The purpose of this article is therefore to provide a qualitative, empirically based typology of offenders who use online communications to commit sex crimes against minors, both offenders who met victims online and those who knew them in person.

METHOD

Our typology is derived from information gathered as part of the Third National Juvenile Online Victimization (NJOV3) Study. NJOV3 is a largely empirical study of a national sample of 2,653 law enforcement agencies that collected data about 2009 arrests for Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes. Trained interviewers conducted detailed telephone interviews with investigators about specific cases and created case narratives describing each case. This qualitative analysis was based on a subsample of these narratives.

Sample

A three-frame stratified sample of agencies was used, because the more than 15,000 U.S. law enforcement agencies are not equally likely to handle Internet-related cases. The first frame included agencies mandated to investigate Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes ($n = 176$); first frame agencies were sampled with certainty. The second frame consisted of agencies with staff trained in Internet-related child sexual exploitation cases ($n = 1,636$), about half of which were randomly selected to participate in the study ($n = 815$). The third frame consisted of all other local, county, and state law enforcement agencies in the United States ($n = 13,572$), identified from an annually updated national directory of law enforcement agencies; about 12% were randomly selected for the sample ($n = 1,662$).

Procedures

Mail surveys asking about arrests during 2009 for Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes were sent to the heads of agencies with cover letters explaining the research. Reminder postcards and two follow-up mailings were sent to nonresponding agencies; nonresponders were then contacted by telephone or fax. The response rate to the mail survey was 86%.

When agencies reported relevant arrests, the survey asked for contact information for the investigating officer. Trained interviewers then contacted investigators to schedule interviews. Interviewers used a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system to gather details about reported cases and they prepared narrative summaries describing each case. The telephone interview response rate was 64%. Data were collected between March 2010 and March 2011. Study procedures were approved by the University of New Hampshire Human Subjects Review Board.

Measures

The mail survey asked: "Between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2009, did your agency make ANY ARRESTS in cases involving the attempted or completed sexual exploitation of a minor, AND at least one of the following occurred: (a) The offender and the victim first met on the Internet [or] (b) The offender committed a sexual offense against the victim on the Internet, regardless of whether or not they first met online." Both the mail survey and the follow-up telephone interview defined "Internet" as including cell phones used for text messaging and creating and storing images. Offenders had online communications with victims if they met victims online or if they knew each other in person and used technology to communicate. More information about the methodology of the NJOV3 study can be found online (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011).

Developing the Typology

To develop a qualitative typology of offenders who used online communications to commit sex crimes against minors, 75 case narratives were selected according to three criteria. First, the narrative described a case that involved offenders who met minor victims online or knew them face-to-face and used technology to communicate with victims ($n = 282$), as the purpose of the analysis was to identify technology-facilitated communication patterns between offenders and victim involved in sex crimes. Second, the cases came from agencies in all three sampling frames used in the study, because cases handled by large agencies experienced with Internet-related child sexual exploitation crimes might have differed from those handled by smaller agencies that rarely encountered such cases. Third, because some of the case narratives were short and lacking in details, those with the most information and richest details were selected for analysis, specifically narratives that described the offender's motivations and the dynamics of the relationship between the offender and the victim.

The qualitative analysis was based on the grounded theory approach and focused on constant comparisons (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Constant comparison analysis is a repetitive process in which data are compared, categories are formed, and emerging categories are validated by using them to reexamine the data. The expected product of this process is a set of generalizations, which are interrelated and constitute a theoretical model grounded in qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The case narratives were coded thematically using a qualitative software program (Atlas ti version 5), a data management program aimed at organizing qualitative project coding and memos.

Data analysis included several stages (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). During the first stage, each case narrative was entered as a case into the computer program and open coding was performed, yielding initial categories. More precisely, the narratives were broken down into small segments of text, representing discrete "meaning units." Each meaning unit was labeled and the units were then grouped together as categories according to these labels. Some of these categories were removed or changed and additional codes and categories were added as the author read through the cases. For example, several units were defined as *reciprocal relationships* between offenders and victims, whereas others were defined as *unilateral relationships*. Second, categories and subcategories were classified by their dimensions and properties, and a relationship between them was established (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). For example, the reciprocal versus unilateral relationships were combined with other categories such as gradual versus immediate and implicit versus explicit relationships, and were further classified under a larger category of offender's relationship dynamics with victim. Third, conceptual themes were suggested along with their interrelationships.

At that stage, when necessary, the authors returned to the case narratives to retrieve additional information needed to develop the categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

At this last step the authors, using the four identified dimensions (i.e., patterns of online communication, offender's offline and online identities, offender's relationship dynamics with the victim, and offender's level of sex crime expertise) identified four types of offenders: the experts, the cynical, the affection-focused, and the sex-focused. Because no new categories emerged after further analysis, the authors concluded that these were the common types of offenders using online communications to commit sex crimes against minors. Once the typology was completed, the authors reexamined all of the selected case narratives to ensure they could each be classified to one of the categories. The authors discussed some of the cases until a consensus was achieved.

RESULTS

Seventy-five cases of offenders who used online communications to commit sex crimes against minors, described by law enforcement officers, were used to form the typology. The dimensions that provided the structure for the typology, as well as the four types of offenders, are described next, including case examples to illustrate the findings.

Identifying General Characteristics of Offenders

During the analysis, four dimensions were revealed: the offenders' patterns of online communication, offline and online identities, relationship dynamics with victims, and levels of sex crime expertise. Each dimension contained subdimensions and represented different aspects of the offenders' characteristics. Not all categories were exclusive, meaning different types of offenders might have shared characteristics.

OFFENDERS' PATTERNS OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION

All offenders used computers or cell phones to communicate with victims and communications usually included sexual texts and images. There were three variations in how technology assisted in forming relationships between offenders and victims. The first variation consisted of relationships that were based solely online. These offenders met victims online, had sexual interactions online, and never met face-to-face. In the second variation, offenders met victims online, had online sexual interactions, and then moved to offline sexual activity. In the third variation, offenders knew victims face-to-face

rather than meeting them online, but used computer or cell phone communications to establish or maintain offline sexual interactions. Offenders' use of electronic devices for online sexual purposes varied from moderate (e.g., sending and receiving sexual texts and images to one victim), to extensive (e.g., online communication with several victims simultaneously and possession and distribution of large collections of child pornography).

OFFENDERS' OFFLINE AND ONLINE IDENTITIES

Offline identities were categorized by age, gender, and public identity. Age was important because the offenders committed sex crimes that involved illegal sexual activities with underage youth. Some case narratives described offenders who were close in age to their victims (teens or young adults), whereas others described substantial gaps between offenders and victims (e.g., the victim was 17 and the offender was 65 years in an extreme case). Most offenders were male and only a few were female. The public identities of the offenders varied on a continuum. Some were described in case narratives as those who "most girls would have run away from if they saw [them] in real life." These were offenders who could be characterized as vagrant, poorly educated, unemployed, or suffering from mental illness. Other offenders, though, were described as having jobs (sometimes prestigious ones), college educations, and no histories of legal or personal problems. Some were positively involved in their communities, such as church volunteers.

Offenders also had online identities, which could be truthful or fabricated (e.g., presenting themselves as minors when they were adults). In some cases of fabrication, victims discovered the true identity of the offender when they met offline for the first time.

OFFENDERS' RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS WITH THE VICTIM

Relationships with victims varied in four aspects: how offenders knew victims, the type of sexual offenses committed, whether the relationship was unilateral versus reciprocal, and immediate versus gradual. Some of the offenders met victims online, whereas others knew victims in person prior to the offense. Sexual interactions with victims could be noncontact crimes committed online (e.g., the offender and the victim met online and exchanged nude photos with no intention of meeting face-to-face). They could also be contact offenses, usually nonforcible (i.e., the offender and the victim communicated online for a few months and then met face-to-face several times for sexual interactions). In reciprocal relationships, victims willingly cooperated with offenders, and in unilateral relationships victims were forced or manipulated into online sexual interactions or sexual contact. In immediate relationships, offenders brought up sexual interests or demands at the beginning of the relationships, whereas other relationships

developed gradually; for example, the offender first groomed the victim without immediately bringing up sex-related topics.

OFFENDERS' LEVEL OF SEX CRIME EXPERTISE

The offender's level of expertise in committing a sex crime varied according to five characteristics. These included (a) the existence of additional victims or crimes, (b) collaboration with other offenders, (c) possession and distribution of child pornography, (d) the complexity of the criminal conduct (i.e., the use of sophisticated strategies to deceive victims), and (e) awareness of criminality (i.e., whether the offender knowingly targeted an underage youth).

Some of the offenders had one victim and others had multiple victims, including a minority with hundreds of offline or online victims. Some of the offenders might (but not necessarily) have committed additional crimes, such as previous sexual assaults. Most acted alone, but some were involved with other offenders, for example, exchanging child pornography online or mutual participation in sexual assaults. Some of them possessed a collection of child pornography for personal use or distribution. Some of them used multiple and sophisticated ways to deceive their victims and were described in case narratives as experts in concealing their actions, making it very hard for law enforcement to track them. These were usually cases of offenders who actively offended for a long period of time before being identified and arrested. For example, in one case the offender created two fictitious social network profiles. He first began talking online to the victim using a 13-year-old bisexual female profile that he had created. The victim fell in love with the 13-year-old persona, who eventually asked the victim to send sexual pictures, which she did. The offender then used a 14-year-old female profile and told the victim that the 13-year-old was now in a coma. The 14-year-old persona became friends with the victim and introduced her to the offender's actual profile. The victim accepted his friend request, never knowing that he was also the 13-year-old and 14-year-old personas she thought she had been talking to.

Other offenders did not attempt to conceal their relationships with victims or were less sophisticated and easy to track. The latter offenders knew the true age of their victims and understood that their relationships with the victims were criminal. However, a small portion of offenders were involved with teens who pretended to be adults and were not aware of committing crimes until they were arrested. In some cases, victims pretending to be adults told offenders their true ages only after the relationship was initiated. Other offenders were aware that sexual relationships with underage teens were illegal but did not think they would get into trouble with the law. One of them compared being involved with an underage teen as equal to getting a speeding ticket.

Types of Offenders

Using the four identified dimensions (patterns of online communication, offline and online identities, relationship dynamics, and level of sex crime expertise), we identified specific types of offenders. More explicitly, it became clear during the analysis that certain subdimensions were likely to be present only among specific groups of offenders. For example, several offenders demonstrated high levels of crime expertise combined with lack of affection toward their victims. This group, which resembled the stereotype of offenders likely to be described in the media, was labeled the experts. This label, though, did not fit several other offenders who presented lack of crime expertise combined with high affection toward their victims. We labeled them as affection-focused. Eventually we came up with four different types of offenders: the experts, the cynical (motivated by self-interest but with a lower degree of expertise), the affection-focused, and the sex-focused. [Table 1](#) describes the typology and related dimensions. The vertical axis of the typology includes offenders who differ in some aspects in their patterns of communication, offline and online identities, relationship dynamics, and expertise. The following is a description of the characteristics of the four typologies.

THE EXPERTS

Twenty-four of the 75 cases (32%) were identified as the expert type. The experts always had more than one victim, sometimes hundreds of them. They picked their victims systematically, depending on their preferences (in terms of age or gender). Some picked victims based on special characteristics that made them easy targets. For example, some picked victims who were overweight and struggling with self-image or lonely children who were looking for attention. To get their cooperation, some offenders provided victims with benefits such as money or gifts. Many spent massive amounts of time contacting victims and used more than one technique to attract victims. Most worked alone but some collaborated with other offenders. This collaboration included committing assaults together, helping each other get access to potential victims, or sharing child pornography images and videos.

In most cases with expert offenders, the specific abuse that was disclosed was the “tip of the iceberg,” and was followed by police discovering large amounts (about 1 million images in one case) of child pornography as well as additional victims. All of the experts were fully aware they were committing sexual crimes and some of them looked for sophisticated or extreme ways to conceal their crimes. In one case, for example, the investigating officer thought the offender was willing to kill his victim to avoid being caught. The experts were acting to satisfy their own needs. They never got emotionally attached to their victims. The dichotomy between the offender and

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the Four Typologies

Type	Patterns of online communication	Offline and online identities	Relationship dynamics with victims	Level of sex crime expertise
The experts	Offenders usually meet victims online. Some relationships are based solely online, others continue to face-to-face meetings. Offenders often know victims face-to-face first. They might also meet victims online and continue to face-to-face meetings or remain solely online.	Some offenders fabricate online identities; some present true identities.	The sexual relationship can develop immediately or gradually. It can be unilateral or reciprocal.	High level of expertise.
The cynical	Offenders usually meet victims online and then continue to face-to-face meetings.	Some offenders fabricate online identities; some present true identities.	The sexual relationship can develop immediately or gradually. The relationship is usually reciprocal, at least in the first stage.	Moderate to low level of expertise.
The affection-focused	Offenders usually meet victims online and then continue to face-to-face meetings.	Offenders present true identities.	The sexual relationship develops gradually and is reciprocal.	Low level of expertise.
The sex-focused	Offenders meet victims online and quickly continue to face-to-face meetings.	Offenders present true identities.	The sexual relationship develops immediately and is reciprocal.	Low level of expertise.

the victim in the expert cases was very clear and resulted in cases that law enforcement described as “horrific.”

The online communication patterns of the experts included two main scenarios. The first was relationships that were based solely online. For example, offenders tracked multiple victims, usually using social networking sites, and requested them to send sexual photos or videos. The second scenario was relationships that started online and moved to offline meetings where victims were forced or manipulated into sexual relationships with offenders. In this second scenario, offenders often documented the sexual abuse by producing child pornography. Expert offenders were also likely to possess large collections of child pornography. This is a case example of an expert offender:

The offender (male, 37) and the victim (female, 14) met in a chat room and used chat rooms, social networking sites, and cell phones to communicate. The offender brought up sexual topics almost immediately and he sent the victim pictures of his penis. He asked her to send him sexual pictures of herself and she did. The offender told the victim that he was in the military but this was a false identity, although he did work in law enforcement. He also had child pornography and was trading child pornography with other offenders. There were over 1,000 still images and some of them featured violence. There were over a hundred videos. There was evidence he was communicating with between 30 and 40 minor females and asking them for nude images. There were eight or nine girls in the 12- to 16-year age range that officials identified as being victims. Most were overweight or had acne or other problems, resulting in them feeling unattractive. The offender appeared to specifically target such girls. Two of the victims that police interviewed said “he made them feel good.”

THE CYNICAL

Twenty-six out of 75 cases (34.6%) were classified as the cynical type. Cynical offenders had certain similarities with the expert group, but they were less sophisticated and less extreme. They usually only had one or a small number of victims. When they had more than one victim it was usually the result of easy access to additional victims (e.g., abusing several siblings from the same family or victims who lived in the same neighborhood). They tended to choose victims according to personal preferences, which might have had an impact on the number of additional victims. For example, some cynics were interested in a certain age group and so abused one victim until he or she got older and then sought alternative victims. Cynics might spend time and effort to groom and acquire victims’ trust, but significantly less time and with less sophistication than displayed by the experts.

Cynics usually perpetrated alone. As with the experts, they were fully aware they were committing sexual crimes and did not get emotionally attached to victims (although they might demonstrate affection toward a victim to achieve sexual goals). They used true or fabricated identities, depending on the circumstances. For example, a cynical offender might present himself as a minor when he believed that would give him better access to a victim, but he might also use a true identity to gain a victim's trust by pretending to be a caring, protective adult. The cynical group could be described as novice experts (Ward, 1999), having less complex knowledge of offending and fewer offending-related skills compared to experts.

In regard to their online communication patterns, many cynical offenders targeted victims they knew face-to-face. Yet relationships that were based online or that started online and developed into face-to-face meetings were also typical. Many cynical offenders possessed child pornography, but not on as large a scale as the experts. This is a case example of a cynical offender:

The offender (male, 29) was the victim's (female, 14) uncle. The victim's mother found text messages on her daughter's cell phone that were sexual in nature and discovered the offender had sent them. At first, the victim was flattered by the offender's attention, but then became increasingly uncomfortable. Under police supervision, the victim's mother presented herself as the victim and continued the conversations. Eventually, a meeting was arranged. The victim's mother pretended she was going to be out of town and the offender suggested to the victim that this would be a good time to come over and "educate" her about sex. He believed he was going to be the victim's first sexual partner. The offender traveled to the victim's home and brought condoms and sex toys with him to use on her. The offender was arrested when he arrived at the house.

THE AFFECTION-FOCUSED

Sixteen out of 75 cases (21.3%) were identified as the affection-focused type. This group of offenders was characterized by genuine feelings of love, care, and affection for victims. If relationships started online, affection-focused offenders presented their true identities. Sometimes they were not aware they were involved with a minor (e.g., when the juvenile presented herself or himself as an adult). In some cases, affection-focused offenders learned the age of victims later in the relationship but felt too emotionally involved to sever relations. In other cases they were older teens, unaware that they were involved in an illegal relationship with an underage teen. The relationship between offenders and victims was reciprocal, and did not include any kind of coercion or manipulation. It should be noted that expert, cynical, and affection-focused offenders can present themselves as loving and caring figures, but the experts and cynics manipulated victims, whereas affection-focused offenders perceived their feelings as genuine.

The most common communication pattern with affection-focused offenders began online and developed into a close romantic relationship online, with both offenders and victims interested in deepening the relationship and meeting face-to-face. It was rare for an affection-focused offender to possess child pornography. This is a case example of an attention-focused offender:

The offender (male, 19) and the victim (female, 11) met in an online gaming site. They developed a relationship and communicated online for about 2 years. The talk turned sexual after some months. The victim sent the offender sexual images of herself by cell phone and instant messages. The offender also sent sexual images of himself to the victim by cell, instant messages, and webcam. At first the victim told the offender she was 16. By the time he was arrested he thought she was 18 because 2 years had passed. He only found out the victim's real age when their relationship was discovered. He continued to try to contact the victim even after he was told to stop communicating with her. The offender and victim lived in different states and never met face-to-face.

THE SEX-FOCUSED

Nine cases out of 75 (12%) were identified as the sex-focused type. These offenders were looking for immediate sexual encounters. They did not appear to be seeking underage youth, but were willing to be engaged in sexual interactions with an underage youth if approached by one. Their sexual intentions were fully known to their victims from the beginning of the relationships. The sex-focused offenders generally presented their true identities. In many cases, the victims initiated relationships, often fabricating online identities as adults interested in sexual encounters with other adults. In some of these cases, though, sex-focused offenders were aware that they were connecting with youth, yet they did not specifically look for underage victims, but rather for sex partners.

The relationships between the sex-focused offenders and their victims could be viewed as exchanges or deals. The offenders might not have intended to assault underage victims, but they were focused on fulfilling sexual goals and so continued with sexual encounters even if they discovered their partner was a minor, and sometimes when the minor wanted to withdraw. In one extreme case, for example, a sex-focused offender raped a victim after she changed her mind about having sex with him during their prearranged encounter. As opposed to the expert or the cynical, these relationships were reciprocal in that both offenders and victims were interested in sexual encounters. As opposed to affection-focused offenders, the sex-focused offenders were not interested in forming intimate relationships. The sexual intentions were explicit from both sides, at least at the beginning, and the engagement in sexual acts was immediate. The relationships were brief.

The online communication in the sex-focused cases included initial connections first based online at sexually oriented Internet sites. These online connections were very brief and did not include grooming. They were aimed at establishing sexual interests and arranging face-to-face sexual encounters. This is a case example of a sex-focused offender:

The victim (female, 13) was posing as a 19-year-old on a sexually oriented social networking site called *sexsearch.com*. She was contacted by the offender (male, 23) and they had a short interaction online and a brief exchange over the phone. A few hours after initially meeting online, the offender traveled to meet her and had intercourse with her assuming that she was the age she claimed to be. The victim met another adult male on *sexsearch.com* and had a brief text message interaction with him. This time she feared he would rape her and she forwarded his texts to a friend's cell phone. The father of the friend was in possession of the phone, saw the texts, and reported it to the police. The victim's statement led to the offender's arrest and eventual charge and conviction for fourth-degree statutory rape.

Limitations

Some limitations should be borne in mind while interpreting these findings. The analysis was based on case narratives written by interviewers about interviews they conducted with law enforcement investigators. Even though most of the narratives selected for analysis tended to be relatively rich in details, some of them included only short descriptions, making it hard to fully understand the offenders' identities as well as their relationship dynamics with the victim. In addition, the case narratives were based on interviews conducted with law enforcement officers and describe how they perceived the offenders, which does not necessarily reflect the way the offenders themselves perceived their motivations or the relationship dynamics with their victims.

CONCLUSIONS

A typology of offenders who committed technology-facilitated sex crimes against minors was developed, based on 75 narratives from law enforcement officers about cases in which arrested offenders used online communications in the commission of sex crimes against minors. The typology can be illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

The plot is displayed in relation to two continuums of offender characteristics: The horizontal continuum represents sex-focused versus affection-focused offenders and the vertical continuum represents offenders with crime expertise versus offenders without crime expertise. Each of the four types of offenders previously discussed could be classified into both of these continuums. In this analysis, no cases matched the affection-focused

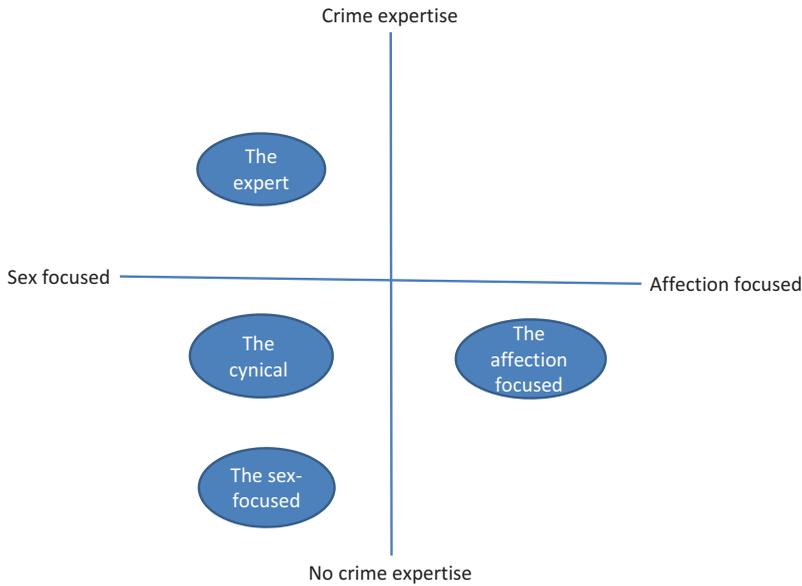


FIGURE 1 Online offenders' typology distribution.

expert category, but theoretically such cases could exist. For example, the offender could feel love and affection toward multiple victims (Gilgun, 1994) while using systematic sophisticated ways to get their cooperation.

The typology reveals that online offenders have heterogeneous characteristics and offers a diverse, more complex description of types of offenders than the stereotypical view of the online offender. This stereotype suggests that online offenders are experts who use technology to identify potential victims, contact them using fabricated identities, and seduce them into offline meetings to sexually exploit them. The stereotyped view is not false, but it represents only certain types of offenders, mainly the expert or the cynical offenders. These are also the types that are mainly discussed in the previous typologies (e.g., Alexy et al., 2005; Briggs et al., 2001; Krone, 2004). The affection-focused and the sex-focused offenders are likely to be less discussed, but these two types raise important social and moral questions and pose a dilemma to professional experts dealing with prevention and treatment of offenders and victims. For example, are affection-focused offenders less prone to recidivism than expert offenders because they are motivated by emotions for a specific victim and therefore are less likely to abuse other victims?

Recent findings suggest that most online offenders commit nonforcible offenses while using promises of love, intimacy, care, or sexual experiences to potential victims, usually youth under the age of consent (Wolak et al., 2009). Still, this does not clarify the diversity of the relationship dynamics

between offenders and victims. The expert and cynical offenders use false promises of love and caring to convince victims to engage in sexual relationships. At some point, however, many victims realize they have been betrayed and that the offenders' professed intentions were not genuine. For example, there were cases where victims got pregnant and were distressed that offenders abandoned them or suggested they obtain an abortion. In other cases, victims found out that offenders had relationships with other victims or they lied about not being married or having children. However, the affection-focused offenders seemed to feel genuine love for victims, and did not use manipulation. Some affection-focused offenders continued relationships with victims even after law enforcement intervened. In some cases, for example, the offender and victim waited until the victim reached the age of consent and then got married. The sex-focused offender was interested in satisfying sexual needs, but not necessarily with minors. He did not look for ways to manipulate victims, but was after an immediate sex partner. The victims in the sex-focused cases tended to be sexually active and might be simultaneously involved with several other sexual partners who were either adults or adolescents. Although this does not change the nature of the crime itself or the offender's responsibility, it does pose questions about how these offenders and victims should be evaluated and treated. All cases analyzed in this article ended in arrest, meaning the relationships were considered sex crimes. Although all the relationships were forbidden by law, the differences between the four types of offenders are important in understanding the diversity, and to specify suitable interventions to each type.

DISCUSSION

Although offenders who committed Internet-related sex crimes against children are a heterogeneous group, the underlying assumption is that all types demonstrate some degree of paraphilia (i.e., deviant sexual fantasies resulting in deviant sexual behaviors; Bourget & Bradford, 2008). Cognitive behavioral therapy and relapse prevention is currently the most common treatment for adult sexual offenders and it is focused, in general, on helping the offenders control their deviant sexual behavior by adopting suitable ways of thinking (for review see Ricci & Clayton, 2008). Although this strategy might fit some of the offender types suggested in this study (namely, the experts and the cynical types, who appear to purposefully seek sexual contacts with minors), it might not be suited to the affection-focused and the sex-focused offender types. In most cases, these offenders do not seem to be driven by deviant sexual thoughts and beliefs. Both affection- and sex-focused offenders often are not aware of being sexually involved with underage partners (at least in the beginning of the relationship). Although they should bear the legal consequences of their actions, it is unclear whether

these types will benefit from the common treatment strategies suggested. The relationships between victims and offenders are complicated and diverse. In some of these cases the relationships might have appeared genuine and reciprocal and the victims involved needed some sort of resolution. There is not a singular treatment plan that can fit all these cases, which should be evaluated individually. Interventions for offenders should take into account the diversity in motivation and in relationship dynamics, and avoid treating them as a homogenous group defined as “child molesters” or “rapists” (Bourget & Bradford, 2008).

In the same manner, the typology can also be meaningful in terms of treating victims. The external definition of offender–victim does not necessarily reflect the way the victims perceive their relationships. Trying to fit them into the expert or the cynical relationship type can cause victims to reject and withdraw from treatment. Understanding the diversity is an important stage in evaluating and providing interventions to both offenders and victims. More extensive research is needed to gain a better understanding of the diversity of online offenders, and the way the variety of relationships between victims and offenders impact the victims’ lives. Qualitative interviews with both offenders and victims of technology-facilitated sex crimes would contribute to a more complete view of these typologies.

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