Online predators to blame for suicides, sex trafficking

U.S. Department of Justice officials say teens must be educated about online threats

By Alan Wechsler
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Editor's note: This story describes forms of teen exploitation that are highly disturbing.

When a child or adolescent has a brush with online predators, the results can be tragic – and can occur shockingly fast, according to a presentation by U.S. Department of Justice officials at NYSSBA's 2025 Annual Convention & Education Expo in New York City.

During a session called "Understanding Child Exploitation and Empowering Students to Protect Themselves," federal law enforcement officials told stories of young male teens who were persuaded to send nude pictures of themselves. They thought they were exchanging photos with girls their age, but they were corresponding with adults from abroad. The cybercriminals quickly turned to blackmail. Send us money, they said, or we'll send these photos to everyone you know.

In one case, a 17-year-old boy from San Jose, Calif., a straight-A student getting ready for college, committed suicide within eight hours of the first interaction. In another, a star football player from Detroit did the same thing.

"It happens in a flash," said Marcia Cohen, an assistant U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York who has prosecuted hundreds of child exploitation cases.

Girls also can be ensnared, but the goal isn't always money. It starts out the same as with boys: girls are duped into sending sexually explicit photos and/or videos, then are threatened with exposure. Pressure for self-photography may go on for an extended period, because those images can be sold online. In some cases, victims have met face-to-face with strangers at the instruction of their anonymous, online exploiter, becoming victims of sex trafficking networks.



It is vital that kids feel safe telling an adult if they get blackmailed after sexting, said Angela Tassone, an FBI special agent, right. From left: Tom Wheeler, interim U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Indiana; Steve Grocki, chief of the Child Exploitation Unit at the U.S. Department of Justice; and Marcia Cohen, an assistant U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York. *Photo by Mike Okoniewski*

Federal and state laws prohibit the sending or receipt of pornographic images of minors, and it's also illegal to send a pornographic image to a minor. Anyone, even a teenager, can be prosecuted for doing this, including sending an image of oneself. Predators may share such facts with their victims to pressure them, telling them that they committed a crime and that their lives will be ruined unless they cooperate. [Prosecutors have discretion when a youth is involved in unlawful sexting. In New York State, first-time youth offenders can be eligible for a diversion program.]

It all starts with an online flirtation with someone pretending to be a peer. Impersonation is not difficult; perps grab photos of attractive teens from Facebook or some other source and create an online persona.

"You've got a kid sitting in their house, feeling very safe," Cohen said. "They're not understanding the person they're talking to is not the person they say they are. It is very difficult for kids to resist this stuff, and yet they have to."

Predators try to make connections through social media sites and interactive video games, reaching thousands of potential victims. Prosecutions often involve bad actors in other countries, including Nigeria, the Ivory Coast and the Philippines.

Many children are already aware of the risks and respond by blocking attempts. But technology allows perpetrators to send out many messages at once.

Another part of the problem is that sharing of explicit photos is part of youth culture. One in four minors agree it's normal for people their age to share nudes with each other, according to the child safety nonprofit Thorn. One in seven minors admit to having shared their own explicit imagery.

Almost six of 10 (59%) minors report that they've had a potentially harmful online experience with someone, according to the non-profit Enough is Enough, which partners with law enforcement and offers an awareness program at internetsafety101.org.

During the Convention presentation, officials noted that reports of such incidents rose by 19 percent in 2024, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

It is vital that kids feel safe telling an adult if something is happening, said Angela Tassone, an FBI special agent. "It's super-important for a child to know it's not their fault," she said.

STUDENT WELL-BEING

"When kids are faced with this, they feel like they're alone," said Interim U.S. Attorney Tom Wheeler of the Southern District of Indiana, a former general counsel to the U.S. Department of Education. "If they have a place to go, they're not going to end up in a suicide situation. And then we can go after these people."

There are three major kinds of predation, Wheeler said. "We've got sexual exploitation, we've got financial exploitation, we've got sadistic exploitation," he said.

One form of sadistic exploitation involves persuading young people to film themselves engaging in cutting themselves. (About 17% of teenagers engage in self-harm at least once, according to the American Psychological Association.) Some cases have involved children goaded into hurting their siblings or pets. Perpetrators who sadistically derive pleasure from such images may share them in interest groups through platforms such as Discord.

Steve Grocki, chief of the Child Exploitation Unit at the U.S. Department of Justice, said children need to understand the fundamentals of safety on the Internet, such as using strong passwords and not sharing them with anyone, even close friends.

They should know that an image they think is private might still be seen, he added. For instance, teens and pre-teens might think Snapchat is safe because that app makes photos and videos disappear shortly after being viewed. All a bad actor needs is a camera or second cellphone to record the image before it disappears, with the victim having no idea.

Storing explicit images is risky because the contents of one's cellphone or computer can be hacked. In 2014 and 2017, hackers exploited flaws in iCloud and used phishing schemes to steal, then leak, private photos and videos from hundreds of celebrities, including Jennifer Lawrence, Kim Kardashian and Emma Watson.

The panelists said that if parents find out their child has interacted with an online predator, it's important not to delete anything. That way, investigators can recover evidence and continue to build a case. Parents should also set all their child's online accounts to "private" and be able to access all their child's apps, games and platforms, they said. Most important: good parent-child communication.

What to do for an online incident:

- Contact your local/state police department.
- Call the FBI Albany Field office at 518-465-7551 (or other regional office).
- Call 1-800-CALL-FBI or contact tips.fbi.gov.
- Submit a report to ic3.gov.

Be sure to provide as much detail as possible in any report.

Resources

- **InternetSafety101.org** – This website for adults offers a free, "evidenced-based curriculum, created in partnership with the Department of Justice, … designed to prevent Internet-initiated crimes against children through educating and empowering parents and caregivers to protect children from online pornography, sexual predators and cyberbullies, as well as social media, online gaming and mobile dangers." Affiliated videos produced by PBS are available at vimeo.com/ondemand/internetsafety101.
- **Youforyouth.org** – Provides educational support, life skills, career readiness and recreational activities to users, including "digital literacy."
- **Love146.org** – Dedicated to ending child trafficking. Teaches online safety.
- **takeitdown.ncmec.org** – If a sextortion incident occurs, this app can be used to keep track of the offensive image, notify law enforcement if it appears and help contact website hosts to enable removal.
- **nctsn.org** – National Child Traumatic Stress Network was created to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events.
- **nsvrc.org** – National Sexual Violence Research Center, dedicated to combating crimes against children by providing high quality research and statistics to the public, policy makers, law enforcement personnel and other child welfare practitioners.
- **laurenskids.org** – Educates adults and children about sexual abuse prevention.
- **NetNanny.com** – Offers an app that can be imbedded in a child's phone so a parent can monitor phone use.