The Third National Juvenile Online Victimization Study (N-JOV3)

Summary. This study is designed to help law enforcement combat technology-facilitated child exploitation crimes. It will gather detailed national data on a number of policy and practice relevant topics including: 1) new developments and numerical trends in cases coming to law enforcement attention; 2) what investigative strategies are associated with more favorable outcomes; 3) what challenges and dilemmas confront prosecutors; 4) what indicators and investigative procedures are more likely to identify child pornography offenders who have also committed crimes against or endangered children in their environments; and 5) how investigators are managing and responding to cases of sexual images produced and disseminated by youth. The data will be gathered using a proven, successful methodology, a 2-stage survey of a national sample of law enforcement agencies that will include interviews with investigators and prosecutors involved in a representative sample of more than 1000 technology-facilitated crimes. N-JOV-3 is funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention sourced from Recovery Act funds.

Background

The domain of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation (CSE) crimes has been characterized by 2 features: rapid growth and changing dynamics. In terms of growth, in 2000 there were an estimated 2,577 arrests for technology-facilitated CSE crimes of all types. By 2006, the number of arrests had almost tripled to 7,010. Arrests of online predators (i.e., sex offenders who used the Internet or related technologies to meet victims) increased more than threefold between 2000 and 2006. In addition to the rapid growth in numbers of cases, new offender tactics have emerged. An example is the increasing use of video. While webcams were rare in 2000, among offenders arrested in 2006 for online predation against actual youth, 27% used video communications to interact with victims.

There is an urgent need for research to help the criminal justice system deal with such a rapid growth and a swiftly changing environment, whose dynamics are not always conspicuous or easy to track. Most of the available research knowledge about technology-facilitated CSE crimes comes from the 1st and 2nd National Juvenile Online Victimization studies (NJOV-1 and NJOV-2), conducted by the CCRC. These studies include information about trends in the incidence of arrests for technology-facilitated CSE between 2000 and 2006 and describe the dynamics of crimes and characteristics of offenders and victims. These two studies provide detailed descriptions of crimes ending in arrest that involve online predation, technology-facilitated CSE by family members and acquaintances of victims, undercover "sting" operations, child pornography (CP) production, and CP possession and distribution. NJOV-2 tracks trends in all of these types of cases. It also includes a component focusing on the role of technology in commercial sexual exploitation of children, and it collected detailed data about the role of social networking sites in technology-facilitated CSE. In addition, NJOV-1 assessed prosecutorial responses to court rulings on evidentiary issues in CP possession cases and examined prosecutorial issues and outcomes in cases of non-forcible Internet-related sex crimes with adolescent victims. N-JOV3 is designed to build on this strong research base.

Goals and Objectives

❖ Assess the scope and characteristics of trends in technology-facilitated CSE crimes.
❖ Examine perpetrator characteristics to illuminate links between possession or trafficking of CP and actual abuse of a child.
❖ Gather and analyze data about how different technologies are used in CSE crimes and about investigative strategies and techniques that address these issues.
❖ Examine the characteristics of and strategies for handling cases in which juveniles manufacture or distribute sexually explicit images of themselves or peers.
❖ Collect data about and evaluate prosecution strategies in technology-facilitated CSE crimes.

Methodology

N-JOV3 follows the same research protocol as the N-JOV1 and N-JOV2 studies. Researchers will send mail surveys to the same national sample of law enforcement agencies that participated in N-JOV1 and N-JOV2. The sample includes all of the ICAC Task Forces, units of federal agencies created to deal with Internet crimes, a random sample of police agencies that have sent staff to trainings in Internet crimes, and a random sample of other agencies. All agencies were recruited during N-JOV1. The mail survey will ask for information about arrests in Internet cases in 2009. Telephone interviewers will follow-up on a sample of reported cases, speaking with investigators and prosecutors and gathering detailed information about the characteristics of cases and the circumstances surrounding them. A similar interview used in N-JOV1 and N-JOV2 will be used in N-JOV3, with changes reflecting technological advances and new venues for such online crimes (e.g., text messaging, social networking sites).

What's New in N-JOV3?

➤ *Prosecution of technology-based CSE crimes*

In N-JOV3 we will gather information from prosecutors who handled technology-facilitated CSE crimes ending in arrest in 2009 (e.g., online predation, CP possession, solicitations to undercover investigators posing online as minors). The cases and prosecutors who handled them will be identified in the law enforcement cases from the telephone interviews. Data from prosecutors will include information that surfaced during the prosecutorial phase and evaluate outcomes such as time to case resolution, strength of evidence from electronic sources, nature of plea bargains, factors contributing to plea bargain decisions (e.g., cooperation of victims, psychological assessments of offenders) and details of sentencing. Also, we will ask prosecutors about their opinions and experiences regarding a variety of issues, such as how technology-facilitated CSE cases are prioritized, assessing CP offenders, ideas for improving victim and witness cooperation and responding to common defense strategies.

➤ *"Sexting"*

In N-JOV3 we will also collect data from both law enforcement and prosecutors about cases of "youth generated sexual images," that is, images of juveniles themselves or peers that meet criminal definitions of CP and are created, distributed or possessed by youth. Although

sometimes referred to in the media as "sexting", this category includes a wide range of dynamics, some more malicious than others. Because many of these cases probably do not end in arrest, we will examine cases reported to or investigated by agencies. The key factors to be examined include: 1) the variety, types and circumstances of such production, with a goal of identifying key distinctions and a practice relevant typology, 2) the investigative and prosecutorial challenges and dilemmas posed by such cases, and 3) an assessment of the practices and responses when such cases are encountered in the criminal justice system.

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