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Debate on Child Pornography's Link to Molesting

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Experts have often wondered what proportion of men who download explicit sexual images of children also molest them. A new government study of convicted Internet offenders suggests that the number may be startlingly high: 85 percent of the offenders said they had committed acts of sexual abuse against minors, from inappropriate touching to rape.

The study, which has not yet been published, is stirring a vehement debate among psychologists, law enforcement officers and prison officials, who cannot agree on how the findings should be presented or interpreted.

The research, carried out by psychologists at the Federal Bureau of Prisons, is the first in-depth survey of such online offenders' sexual behavior done by prison therapists who were actively performing treatment. Its findings have circulated privately among experts, who say they could have enormous implications for public safety and law enforcement.

Traffic in online child pornography has exploded in recent years, and the new study, some experts say, should be made public as soon as possible, to identify men who claim to be "just looking at pictures" but could, in fact, be predators.

Yet others say that the results, while significant, risk tarring some men unfairly. The findings, based on offenders serving prison time who volunteered for the study, do not necessarily apply to the large and diverse group of adults who have at some point downloaded child pornography, and whose behavior is far too variable to be captured by a single survey.

Adding to the controversy, the prison bureau in April ordered the paper withdrawn from a peer-reviewed academic journal where it had been accepted for publication, apparently concerned that the results might be misinterpreted. A spokeswoman for the bureau said the agency was reviewing a study of child pornography offenders but declined to comment further.

Ernie Allen, who leads the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which is mandated to coordinate the nation's efforts to combat child pornography, said he was surprised that the full study had not been released. "This is the kind of research the public needs to know about," Mr. Allen said. Others agreed that the report should be published but were more cautious about the findings. "The results could have tremendous implications for community safety and for individual liberties," said Dr. Fred Berlin, founder of the Johns Hopkins Sexual Disorders Clinic. "If people we thought were not dangerous are more so, then we need to know that and we should treat them that way. But if we're wrong, then their liberties aren't going to be fairly addressed."

Everyone agrees that researchers need to learn more about online consumers of illegal child images. The volume of material seized from computers appears to be doubling each year — the National Center collected more than eight million images of explicit child pornography in the last five years — and Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales made child protection a national priority in 2006.

Those who are arrested on charges of possession or distribution of child pornography generally receive lighter sentences and shorter parole periods than sexual abusers. They do not fit any criminal stereotype; recent arrests have included politicians, police officers, teachers and businessmen.

"It's crucial to understand the sexual history of all these offenders, because sometimes the crime they were arrested for is the tip of the iceberg, and does not reflect their real patterns and interests," said Jill S. Levenson, an assistant professor of human services at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., and head of the ethics committee of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers.

Previous studies, based on surveys of criminal records, estimated that 30 percent to 40 percent of those arrested for possessing child pornography also had molested children.

The psychologists who conducted the new study, Andres E. Hernandez and Michael L. Bourke, focused on 155 male inmates who had volunteered to be treated at the Federal Correctional Institution in Butner, N.C., according to a draft of the paper obtained by The New York Times from outside experts who want the study published.

The Butner clinic is the only residential program devoted to the treatment of sexual offenders in the federal prison system. The inmates in the study were all serving sentences for possession or distribution of child pornography.

About every six months as part of an 18-month treatment program, they filled out a record of their sexual history, including a "victims list" tallying their previous victims of abuse. Therapists encouraged the men to be honest as part of their treatment, and the sexual histories were anonymous, according to the paper.

The psychologists compared these confessions with the men's criminal sexual histories at the time of sentencing. More than 85 percent admitted to abusing at least one child, they found, compared with 26 percent who were known to have committed any "hands on" offenses at sentencing. The researchers also counted many more total victims: 1,777, a more than 20-fold increase from the 75 identified when the men were sentenced.

Dr. Hernandez and Dr. Bourke concluded in the paper that "many Internet child pornography offenders may be undetected child molesters." But they also cautioned that offenders who volunteer for treatment may differ in their behavior from those who do not seek treatment.

They submitted the paper to The Journal of Family Violence, a widely read peer-reviewed publication in the field, and it was accepted.

But in a letter obtained by The Times, dated April 3, Judi Garrett, an official of the Bureau of Prisons, requested that the editors of the journal withdraw the study, because it did not meet "agency approval."

Editors at The Journal of Family Violence did not respond to phone or e-mail messages asking about the withdrawal.

Dr. Hernandez mentioned the research briefly during testimony before a Senate committee last year. But the bureau blocked Dr. Hernandez and Dr. Bourke from attending some law enforcement conferences to speak about the findings, said two prosecutors who did not want to be identified because they have a continuing work relationship with the bureau.

"We believe it unwise to generalize from limited observations gained in treatment or in records review to the

broader population of persons who engage in such behavior," a bureau official wrote to the organizers of a recent law enforcement conference, in a letter dated May 2 and given to The Times by an expert who is hoping the study will be published.

Some prosecutors say they could use the study to argue for stiffer sentences. While some outside researchers agreed that the risk of over-generalizing the study's results was real, almost all the experts interviewed also said that the study should still be made public.

Dr. Peter Collins, who leads the Forensic Psychiatry Unit of the Ontario Provincial Police, called the findings "cutting-edge stuff."

"We're really on the cusp of learning more about these individuals and studies should be encouraged, not quashed," Dr. Collins said.

Understanding the relationship between looking at child pornography and sexually assaulting children is central to developing effective treatment, psychologists say.

It is not at all clear when, or in whom, the viewing spurs action or activates a latent, unconscious desire; or whether such images have little or no effect on the offender's subsequent behavior. But the relationship probably varies widely.

"My concern is about sensationalism, about the way something like this is handled in the media," said Michael Miner, an associate professor in the department of family medicine at the University of Minnesota who treats sex offenders. "The public perception is that all of these guys will re-offend, and we know that just isn't true."

At least some men convicted of sexual abuse say that child pornography from the Internet fueled their urges. In a recent interview, one convicted pedophile serving a 14-year sentence in a Canadian federal prison said that looking at images online certainly gave him no release from his desires — exactly the opposite.

"Because there is no way I can look at a picture of a child on a video screen and not get turned on by that and want to do something about it," he said. "I knew that in my mind. I knew that in my heart. I didn't want it to happen, but it was going to happen."

How many offenders does he speak for? The study may help answer that question, some say.

"The penalties we seek, the vigor with which we prosecute — the very importance we give to child pornography cases — all of these things are affected by what we know about the offenders," said Leura G. Canary, the United States attorney for Middle Alabama who also leads the Attorney General's Working Group on Child Exploitation and Obscenity. "And right now we know very little."

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