

Even fewer youth have face-to-face meetings with unknown online “friends.” According to a survey of adolescents conducted by the Adolescent Risk Communication Institute of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, few social network users (3%) reported actually meeting strangers offline. Only 2 percent of teens in YISS-1 reported online “romances” (defined as someone met online who the youth believed to be a boyfriend or girlfriend [Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003]). Although the findings from these surveys suggest that children are at risk for this form of exploitation, such victimization constitutes a small proportion of the sexual abuse, exploitation, and other crimes to which children are vulnerable. In addition, the results of these surveys suggest that most of the solicitations made online by potential CSA perpetrators fail; they do not result in offline sexual assault or illegal sexual contact.

Scholars have proposed several approaches to combating the problem of Internet exploitation of youth. A first step is to educate youth, parents, and professionals who work with youth and families about the potential dangers of the Internet and how they can protect against this form of exploitation. Parents need to be educated, for example, about ways in which they can limit their child’s Internet access (e.g., browser access controls, software filters). An additional approach is for families to place any computers with Internet access in family living areas rather than in private rooms and for parents to instruct their children not to enter Internet chat rooms without parental permission (Kreston, 2002; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 2014). Legislation has also been enacted to address this form of exploitation. The United States has established an \$11 million federal program that includes Internet Crimes Against Children task forces, which were developed to assist state and local law enforcement agencies in conducting undercover investigations, provide technical assistance and training, and develop prevention and education materials (Wortley & Smallbone, 2012). Additional efforts are necessary to ensure that federal and state child abuse statutes, most of which were written prior to the development of the Internet, apply to illegal behaviors carried out online.