

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF CRIMINOLOGY

Question No. 63

Senator Barnett asked the following question at the hearing on 25 May 2010:

Please provide evidence or specific figures to support the claim that the sexual exploitation or grooming of children through the internet is on the rise.

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

Child grooming is able to be achieved with relative ease in the online environment; the anonymous nature of the internet allows offenders to mislead and entice children into disclosing personal information (including photos and identity details) or agreeing to meet the offender in the real world. Further, offenders are able to masquerade or pose as children in cyberspace to gain the confidence and trust of their victims.

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to exploitation via the internet and the new media channels because these forums are attractive to them. Children and young people often use the internet and the new media channels unsupervised and increasingly have access to portable devices with the capacity for data storage, digital photography and communications such as third generation mobile phones. The types of offences that are relevant to online child exploitation include accessing, sending or uploading child exploitation material; grooming and procuring of children and young people over the internet; possession and publication of child exploitation materials; and sexual assault of children and young people.

Given the relatively new phenomenon of online child grooming, it is difficult to obtain long term trend data on reported convictions. However, statistics demonstrate clearly there has been a large increase in use of the internet and new media channels, such as social networking sites, creating greater opportunity for sexual offenders.

Use of the internet and new media channels (e.g. social networking sites)

The internet and new media channels are becoming increasingly integral to Australians' lives, including children. Facebook and MySpace – two most popular social networking sites – accounted for 6.9 million and 3.3 million Australian home users respectively during the June quarter of 2009¹.

17 percent and 24 percent of respondents aged between 12 and 17 years old, and 8 and 11 years old respectively reported that one of their main reasons for using social networking sites was to make new friends². The internet and social networking sites can be and have been abused by cybercriminals and child sex predators to reach out to children and young people, as explained in the AIC report³.

¹ Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2010. *ACMA Communications Report 2008–09*.
http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib311252/08-09_comms_report.pdf

² Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2009. *Click and connect: Young Australians' use of online social media (02: Quantitative research report)*.
http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/aba/about/recruitment/click_and_connect-02_quantitative_report.pdf

³ Choo K-KR 2009. *Online child grooming: A literature review on the misuse of social networking sites for grooming children for sexual offences*. Research and public policy no. 103. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.
http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current_series/rpp/100-120/rpp103.aspx

In a 2007 study commissioned by Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), a representative sample of 751 Australian family households with children and young people (8 to 17 years old) were surveyed. The study found that 42 percent of young people reportedly posted their own material online and 72 percent of young people aged between 14 and 17 years reported having their own profile on a social networking site⁴.

A more recent online survey commissioned by ACMA involving 819 respondents (comprising children aged between eight and 17 years and their parents) reported similar observation. The study found that 90 percent of respondents aged between 12 and 17 years old reported the use of social networking sites; 97 percent of respondents aged between 16 and 17 years reportedly using at least one social networking site; and 91 percent and 74 percent of respondents aged between 12 and 17 years old, and 8 and 11 years old reportedly rated the internet as an important aspect of their daily life respectively⁵.

Victimisation data

A recent cybercrime survey in the United Kingdom estimated that 850,000 cases of unwanted online sexual approaches were made in chat rooms during 2006. In the US Youth Internet Safety Survey conducted in 2006, the 1,500 young people aged between 10 and 17 years reported frequent exposure to unwanted sexual material, sexual solicitations and harassment online.⁶ In the *Growing up with Media* survey, 35 percent of the 1,588 young people aged between 10 and 15 years reported being the victim of either internet harassment or unwanted sexual solicitation.⁷

Crime Statistics

In Australia, until 2007, there have been over 130 completed prosecutions for online procuring, grooming and exposure offences in Australia⁸. In the financial year 2008-2009, there were more than 150 people charged with online child sex exploitation according to the most recent AFP annual report⁹ (Online child exploitation statistics were not available for the previous financial years).

The Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions reported prosecuting an increasing number of offences involving the online exploitation of children in the financial year 2008-09¹⁰. In the financial year 2008-2009,

⁴ Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2007. Media and Communication in Australian Families 2007. http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_310893

⁵ Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) 2009. *Click and connect: Young Australians' use of online social media (02: Quantitative research report)*.
http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/aba/about/recruitment/click_and_connect-02_quantitative_report.pdf

⁶ Wolak J, Mitchell K & Finkelhor D 2006. Online victimization of youth: five years later. Alexandria, VA: *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children*.
http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/RresourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_us&PageId=2530

⁷ Ybarra ML, Espelage DL & Mitchell KJ 2007. The co-occurrence of internet harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation victimisation and perpetration: association with psychosocial indicators. *Journal of adolescent health* 41(6) Supplement 1: s31-41

⁸ Griffith G & Roth L 2007. *Protecting children from online sexual predators*. NSW Parliamentary Library briefing paper no. 10/07. Sydney: NSW Parliamentary Library.
[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/publications.nsf/0/3043E49AB3F4ABF9CA2573530006F989/\\$File/Dealing%20with%20Online%20PredatorsFINAL&INDEX.pdf](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/publications.nsf/0/3043E49AB3F4ABF9CA2573530006F989/$File/Dealing%20with%20Online%20PredatorsFINAL&INDEX.pdf)

⁹ Australian Federal Police (AFP) 2010. *Annual report 2008 - 2009*. http://www.afp.gov.au/media-centre/publications/~/_/media/afp/pdf/a/afp-annual-report-2008-2009.ashx

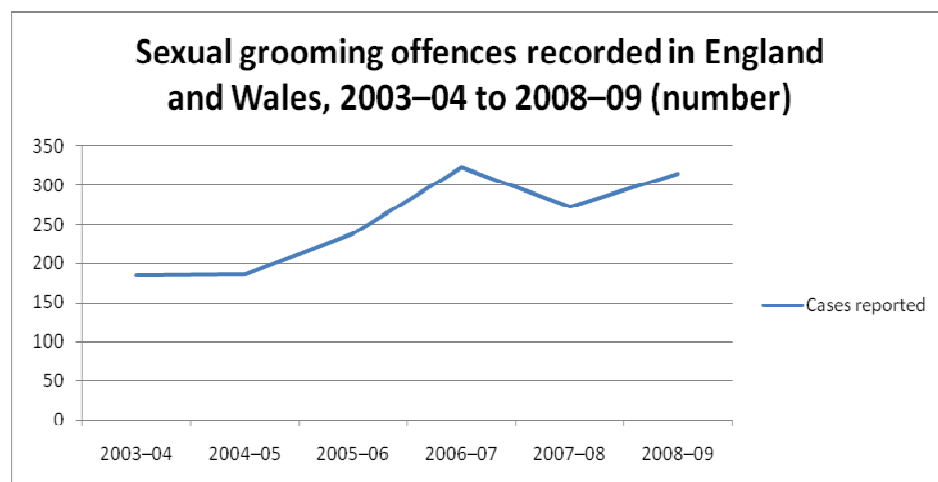
¹⁰ Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions (CDPP) 2010. *Annual report 2008 - 2009*.
<http://www.cdpp.gov.au/Publications/AnnualReports/CDPP-Annual-Report-2008-2009.pdf>

Section 474.26 Criminal Code 1995 (Cth), Using a carriage service to procure persons under 16 years of age - 2 Summary (Charges), 18 Indictable (Charges)

Section 474.27 Criminal Code 1995 (Cth), Using a carriage service to “groom” persons under 16 years of age - 5 Summary (Charges), 15 Indictable (Charges)

In the United States, the number of annual reports of online child exploitation (including online child grooming) made to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children through its CyberTipline increased from 4,560 in 1998 to 76,584 by the end of 2006.¹¹

UK statistics indicated that in the financial year 2008-09, there were 315 online child grooming offences recorded in England and Wales, an increase of 16 percent from the previous financial year¹². The number of offences recorded by police in England and Wales is shown in the figure below.



According to the UK’s Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), ‘grooming is still the number one offence reported to CEOP, while before this was done primarily via instant messaging, a fast-growing trend is exploiting children through vast, integrated social networking sites’¹³.

Statistics for the previous financial years were not available in the respective annual reports (<http://www.cdpp.gov.au/Publications/AnnualReports/>).

¹¹ National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) 2007. CyberTipline annual report totals. Alexandria, VA: NCMEC. http://cybertipline.com/en_US/documents/CyberTiplineReportTotals.pdf

¹² UK Home Office 2009. *Crime in England and Wales 2008/09*. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs09/hosb1109vol1.pdf>

¹³ http://www.ceop.gov.uk/mediacentre/pressreleases/2009/ceop_20052009.asp