



<b>Title</b>	<b>Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth over the Internet: A Rapid Review of the Scientific Literature</b>
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## Aim

To synthesize evidence on the: 1) frequency, effects, and risk factors for sexual exploitation of children/youth over the Internet; 2) assessment tools for children/youth who have been sexually exploited via the Internet; 3) safety, efficacy/effectiveness, and economic, social, legal, and ethical aspects of prevention and therapeutic strategies.

## Conclusions and results

Thirteen relevant studies were identified. Two main types of sexual exploitation were evaluated: Internet-initiated grooming for sexual abuse (online sexual solicitation) and Internet-based receipt of sexual images by children/youth (unwanted exposure to sexual material). Most victims of online sexual exploitation were aged 12.6 to 15.9 years (mean). Prevalence estimates varied widely and should be interpreted with caution. Four studies based on the self-report of children/youth from the general population found that 13% to 19% had experienced online sexual solicitation in the last year. One study found that 2% of all child sexual abuse cases reported to police related to online-initiated sexual solicitation, although a study of a highly selected population showed a rate of 26%. Three studies based on the self-report of children/youth from the general population found that 14% to 34% had been exposed to unwanted sexual material via the Internet. In another study, mental health professionals reported that 6% of their clients had received unwanted sexual material via the Internet.

Risk factors for exposure to online sexual solicitation include: being female over 14 years of age, engaging in high-risk behaviors online (eg, sending personal information to strangers), the presence of other problematic Internet experiences (eg, cyberbullying), high Internet use, and accessing the Internet via mobile devices or computers away from home. Individuals were more likely to be exposed to unwanted sexual material via the Internet if they were: male aged 13 to 17 years, used file sharing programs, frequently accessed chat rooms,

engaged in online conversations with strangers, and accessed the Internet at computers away from home.

No studies reported on assessment tools or preventive or therapeutic strategies for children/youth that have been sexually exploited via the Internet. Various resources are available to educate children, youth, parents, educators, and law enforcement agents about the risks of online sexual exploitation. Most of these approaches focus on safe online practices, but their effectiveness has not been formally evaluated.

## Methods

We searched sociological, criminal justice, psychological, educational, and biomedical electronic databases to identify relevant primary and secondary research published in English from Jan 2003 to Sept 2009. Government websites, scientific conference proceedings, and bibliographies of relevant studies were searched. One reviewer selected studies and extracted data. Data were synthesized qualitatively; the studies were not appraised for quality.

## Further research/reviews required

Research is needed to develop strategies to assess and prevent online sexual exploitation and to evaluate treatment approaches in relation to efficacy, effectiveness, and safety. Government agencies and the new technology industries should be aware of the problem, have knowledge of its characteristics and consequences, and understand the inherent policy and practice implications.