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## Specialist delves into Internet's dark side

by Betsy Choen of the Missoulian (*Front page coverage—Section A1:5*)

The Internet is a magnificent tool of the modern age, but it has a dark side that parents and children need to consider and cannot ignore.

Chat rooms are home to untold numbers of sexual predators, some of whom will go to extreme measures and great distances to have sexual contact with children.

"Child predators are relentless, and it can't be overstated enough how far they will travel to find a child they have picked out to molest - in some cases, they have been known to send money or bus tickets to have a child meet them somewhere," said Russell Grimes, a technology specialist with the Division of Educational Research and Services at the University of Montana.

Funded by a federal grant to promote community-based policing services, and in collaboration with local, state and federal law agencies, Grimes is helping to educate teachers, parents and children about the dangers of Internet predators.

According to a recent U.S. Department of Justice survey, one in four American teenagers report being exposed to unwanted sexual solicitation and sexually explicit information.

In another national survey based on interviews with 1,501 young people ages 10 to 17 who use the Internet regularly: 1 in 33 received an aggressive sexual solicitation - a solicitor who asked to meet them somewhere, or who called them on the telephone, sent them regular mail, money or gifts; and 1 in 17 was threatened or harassed.

"Worldwide sexual exploitation of children is a huge problem, and yes, it does occur here in Missoula, and Montana," said Guy Baker, Missoula City Police detective and a member of the Montana Cyber Crimes Task Force.

A recent example, he said, is the August FBI sting that resulted in the arrest of a Missoula podiatrist who was allegedly using the Internet to entice a young girl into having sex. The girl was instead an undercover FBI agent posing as a girl under the age of 16; the physician was arrested when he showed up for an apparent rendezvous in Billings.

Since 2004, the Cyber Crimes Task Force has arrested about a half-dozen Missoula-area residents who allegedly used the Internet to solicit sex with a minor, or who possessed, produced or exchanged child pornography, Baker said.

"The members of our task force have had people travel from other states all the way to Montana to be with a child they met online," he said. "The Internet is a predator's paradise, and it has accelerated the exchange and production of child pornography."

One of the great and dangerous things about the Internet is that people can find people all over the world who share their same interests, Baker said. But it can also mean predators can feel normal about their illegal proclivities and rationalize their behavior because they have a whole worldwide web of people just like them.

The workshop Grimes gives to students and school administrators is startling because it shows how easy it is for predators to have unlimited and easy access to young people, most of whom are naive about how quickly they can be found in person by revealing even the barest of information about themselves.

In but six clicks of his mouse, Grimes demonstrated how fast someone in a chat room can be traced by their e-mail address and their hobbies. If someone mentions their hometown, it can take less than three clicks of the mouse for a savvy computer user to know how and where to find the person they are talking with.

Personal photos and portraits are particularly dangerous to upload on the Internet because not only do the photos reveal endless details about the subjects to would-be predators, Grimes said, but the photos have the potential to be hijacked by other unsavory characters who will use them for personal gain in fiscal scams or other illegal activities.

"Typically, a screen name tells you a lot about the individual, and a predator will use that small amount of information to trace more information. And by using public data available on the Internet, the predator can quickly identify that person, and in many cases find out who their parents are, where they live and what school they go to," said Dan Vierthaler, an FBI special agent based in Billings. "Telling somebody they live in Billings and have an interest in basketball is not harmless - anybody with computer expertise will find you."

"The message we need to get out to Montana is that this is very similar to the drug problem facing teenagers," he said. "Parents need to spend time with their children talking about their children's Internet use, and parents need to spend time educating themselves about the Internet."

Too often, children in a household know more about the Internet and how to navigate it than do the adults, Vierthaler said. And too often, young people use computers far from adult supervision.

Adding to the problem is the fact that most teens and children use the Internet in the hours after school - before parents get home from work.

"Computers have become something like a modern-day babysitter, but what parents forget or don't really understand is that there is a live person on the other side of their child's conversation who could be next door or around the world," Grimes said.

Computer filtering systems aren't enough to combat the problem because predators know how to dodge the blockades and find children surfing Internet chat rooms. To clarify the point, Grimes recently showed how someone logging into a benign chat room called "study group" can end up in a pornography-filled chat room called "daughters who love their daddies."

There is a tendency to be lulled into a sense of safety when using the Internet to chat with strangers, Vierthaler said. Online chatting usually takes place in people's private space, and users feel like they are cloaked in anonymity.

But people's barriers drop, he said, and caution tends to fade away the more time someone chats with the same individual, and that's when unmerited trust develops between a young person and a predator.

"The Internet is like a doorway to a house," Vierthaler said. "Parents should think about their kids answering the door. Most parents don't want to leave their children alone to decide which strangers to let in.

"Most parents go to the door with their kid and see who's there - and that's what parents should be doing with the computer."