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The History

A Shadowy Trade Migrates to the Web

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In the last few decades, technology has transformed the world of child pornography. The business was severely hampered in the late 1970's, after Congress adopted the first federal law specifically prohibiting child pornography. It became illegal to use minors below the age of 16 in pornographic films and photographs; by 1984, the law was expanded to children under 18.

The crackdown slowed what had been a flood of child pornography to a comparative trickle. Pedophiles in the United States became dependent on video material created overseas or on Polaroid snapshots. But that required locating other adults with similar predilections - almost all of whom, studies show, are men - through personal advertisements in magazines, increasing the probability of being caught.

"In that day and age it was a lot harder to distribute child pornography," said Brad Russ, the director of training and technical assistance for many federally financed law enforcement units dealing with Internet crimes against children. "You were very vulnerable to detection."

The popularity of online communications, starting slowly in the 1980's and expanding rapidly in the 1990's, made possible, for the first time, anonymous gatherings of people with sexual attractions to children.

The result, experts said, was the creation of a virtual community of pedophiles who reinforced each others' beliefs that their feelings were no longer beyond the outer reaches of social norms.

"The Internet has let these people tell themselves that there are a host of others out there just like them," said Michelle Collins, the head of the exploited children unit with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a private organization that works closely with law enforcement and other government agencies.

Soon, child pornography was being swapped and collected online with the vigor and obsession usually found among baseball card enthusiasts. Certain children - whose true identities were unknown - emerged as online stars. Helena, a girl of about eight, was featured in hardcore pornography that included images of her sexual encounters with a young boy, Gavin. By early 2000, experts said, the most desired images were the KG and KX series, hundreds of pornographic pictures of girls from what experts believe was a European kindergarten in sexual encounters with adult men.

But the sudden bounty of child pornography online did nothing to sate the desire of pedophiles. Instead, supply fueled a demand for more, for better, for more explicit - and videos replaced still pictures. As the 1990's drew to an end, law enforcement was just becoming aware of the technological skills of this adult subculture.

"Back in 2000, they were discussing instant messaging as the next step, one that wouldn't leave the tracks that are left on the Internet," said Philip Jenkins, a history professor at Penn State who spent that year tracking pedophile conversations online for his book, "Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet." "And they would talk about kids making the pornography themselves. That was the dream."

The flood of Webcams and their use by young people has created a law enforcement challenge, officials said, impeding efforts to find predators online. In the old days, police and federal agents would pose online as teenagers and arrest the adults who attempted to entice them into sexual situations. But now, law enforcement officials involved in such online impersonations said, it is common for an adult to demand that a teenager turn on a Webcam after the first few minutes of conversation. Police cannot use real children to lure wrongdoers, and they cannot broadcast underage pornographic images. That has left law enforcement officials having to make excuses for why they do not have a Webcam.

"Whenever we say the Webcam is broken or we don't own one," one law enforcement official said, speaking on condition of anonymity, "they just move on, looking for the next kid."