



THE SWEDISH NATIONAL  
BOARD FOR YOUTH AFFAIRS  
[www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se](http://www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se)

# SUMMARY



## Swedish youth policy in brief

The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is a government authority. We work to ensure that young people (13 to 25 years of age) have access to influence and welfare. We do this by producing and communicating knowledge on young people's living conditions. We also distribute funding to the civil society in the form of support for organisations, projects and international cooperation. All the support we distribute is given on behalf of the Swedish government. The EU programme Youth in Action is a tool for practical youth policy at local, regional, national and European levels. The Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs is the national office for Youth in Action.



# Background

The arrival of the internet has radically changed the available opportunities for contacting and developing relationships with people we would otherwise very probably never have heard of. At the same time, the internet also provides considerable opportunities to act with complete anonymity, or under a false identity, and it is possible for people, at no great risk for discovery, to lie or distort information about themselves so that it fits better with the image they want to present. This means that besides functioning as a tool for establishing positive contacts and relationships, the internet can also be used by people, both young and old, who desire to make contact with children and youths for sexual purposes.

With the objective of improving the existing knowledge on children and youths' experiences of sexual exploitation via interactive media, the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs (the Board) was in September 2008 instructed by the Swedish Government to conduct a study among young people between 13 and 25 years

of age. The study was to illuminate young people's experiences of, and attitudes towards, exposure of a sexual nature and sexual exploitation via interactive media such as the internet, and also their experiences of and attitudes towards the provision of sexual services in return for compensation of some kind. The Board was also instructed to analyse whether digital technologies, and the opportunities they provide, may have affected young people's attitudes towards sexual exposure and towards the sale of sexual services. A special focus was to be directed at the situation of young homosexual, bisexual and transgender people.

The Board's work has resulted in a report entitled *Se Mig* [See me]. The report is based on a number of separate quantitative and qualitative studies that have been conducted by the Board itself, by qualified academics working at Swedish universities and by RFSL Ungdom (Sweden's national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth organisation).

## Central findings in brief

### **No increase in the proportion of youth who have received compensation for sexual services**

A study was published in 2004 entitled *Ungdomars sexualitet – attityder och erfarenheter* [Youth sexuality – attitudes and experiences] (Svedin & Priebe 2004), based on a questionnaire survey of students in their third year of further education (aged 18). One of the findings reported in this study was that 1.4 percent of the students stated that they had received some form of

payment for sexual services at some point in their lives. The work conducted in connection with the current report included a follow-up study, which arrived at a more or less identical figure. In this follow-up study, 1.5 percent of respondents reported having at some point received some form of payment for sex.

### **Both males and females receive compensation for sex**

The different studies presented in the *See me* report confirm that both young males and young females have experience of sex in return for some form of payment. Of the students in Year 3 of further education, 1.7 percent of males and 1.2 percent of females reported having at some point provided sexual services in return for payment of some kind. These figures represent only marginal changes in relation to the findings of the 2004 study.

In a questionnaire survey conducted by the Board itself among young people aged between 16 and 25 years of age, 1.7 percent of both males and females reported that they had accepted some form of payment for sex. However, the experiences of municipal prostitution units in Gothenburg, Malmö and Stockholm, as well as those of a number of other municipal service providers (social services and youth clinics), indicate few contacts with youths who sell sex, particularly young males.

## **Young people who receive compensation for sex have problems in various areas of their lives**

The small group of youths with experience of providing sex in return for some form of payment is largely comprised of youths who are experiencing problems in various areas of their lives. Many of the youths have a negative self-image, mental health problems, sexualised behaviour patterns and problems setting limits for themselves. The group is also characterised by a

relatively high level of exposure to threats and violence in the family and by relatively high levels of alcohol and drug consumption. There is furthermore a strong correlation between exposure to sexual abuse and subsequent involvement in providing sex in return for payment.

## **Technology does not cause the sale of sexual services**

Over the course of just over a decade, the use of digital technologies has expanded dramatically and today these technologies impact upon the whole of our society and the lives of just about everyone. Generally speaking, today's young people have no experience at all of living in a society lacking either internet access or mobile phone use. These media provide an extremely effective arena for social contacts, and for both establishing new relationships and maintaining existing ones. Our data provide no support however for the view that these technologies in themselves have led to more youths offering to provide sexual services in return for payment. Thus while the technologies constitute a very important

tool for facilitating contacts between buyers and sellers, they are not the reason why young people sell sex.

The number of people using the internet every day has almost doubled over the past six years, whereas the number of eighteen-year-olds who report ever having received some form of payment in exchange for sex has not changed to any notable degree. Nor is there anything to suggest that youths who spend a great deal of time online have offered to provide, or have themselves been offered, sexual services in return for payment to a greater extent than those who spend less time online.

## **Attitudes towards selling sex have become more accepting**

Generally speaking, it appears that the level of acceptance is higher in relation to the sale of sex than it is in relation to paying for sex. The attitudes of males are more positive than those of females. Since 2004, there has been an increase in the proportion of students in Year 3 of further education who express positive attitudes towards the issue of providing sex in return for some form of payment. The level of acceptance towards others

paying for sex is considerably higher than the level of acceptance expressed towards the idea of doing so oneself. Youths who themselves have experience of sex in return for payment of some kind more often express positive attitudes towards selling sex than do youths with no experience of providing sexual services for payment.

## Many sexual elements in the everyday lives of young people online

Young people are faced with a large amount of sex-related content on the internet. Personal images, comments and questions with sexual overtones are all common. Thirty percent of those aged between 16 and 25 years report that someone has tried to get them to talk about sex, send pictures or do something they didn't want to in front of a web-camera and 2.4 percent have had "sexy" pictures or film clips of themselves spread online against their will. Among the students in Year 3 of further education, fourteen percent have felt offended by the use of coarse sexual language while chatting online with a person they didn't know. Of those who have gone to an offline meeting with someone they first met online, 2.5 percent had been pressured or forced to engage in some form of sexual activity. Females report having had experiences of this kind to a much greater extent than their male counterparts.

Even if the sexual aspects of the internet are not something that young people see as desirable, many of them have accepted that this is the way things are. Only a small proportion of young people respond to approaches of this kind online, and those who do so are first and foremost young males. Young people who spend a lot of time in front of their computers – five hours or more on a daily basis – report having experienced sexual questions or propositions to a significantly greater extent than those who spend less time at their computers. A large amount of time spent on the computer thus increases the risk for exposure to contacts of this kind. However, less than one-fifth of eighteen-year-olds report spending more than five hours a day online.

## Most young people do not post images of themselves online

It is not very common for young people to post sexual images of themselves online. It is true that many popular youth websites provide access to large numbers of images that may seem provocative to an outsider, but when we ask young people themselves, we find that between 90 and 95 percent, depending on the survey, report that they have never posted sexually provocative images of themselves on the internet. The National

Board for Youth Affairs' questionnaire survey of youths aged between 16 and 25 shows that posting such images is somewhat more common among females, while the study conducted among eighteen-year-olds shows no differences between the sexes. Observations conducted of a number of sexually focused social networking sites show that images of boys and men are more common than images of girls and women.

## Several explanations for young people's sexual self-exposure

There are several different reasons why young people engage in sexual self-exposure. One reason is that it provides youths with a means of finding acknowledgement and of improving their self-confidence. It is possible for individuals both to improve self-confidence where this is already strong, and to use positive responses as a means of working to improve low levels of self-confidence or of dealing with various types of negative body complex. Sexual self-exposure becomes a quick and easy way to feel valued and appreciated. In order to understand young people's desire to expose

themselves sexually in this way, these activities should also be viewed in relation to a structural context. The sexual self-exposure of young people constitutes one example of how we feel our way forwards in a range of different areas during our youth, not least in relation to our sexuality. The internet provides increased opportunities to reach out to large numbers of people and to come into contact with others who are interested in sex, without necessarily having to meet them face to face.

## Feeling safe with the technology

There is nothing to suggest that young people are unaware of, or naive about, the fact that digital technologies can be used by others in ways that they themselves would view as undesirable. On the contrary, there is a high level of awareness of the risks involved. Part of the reason why young people, in spite of this awareness, act in a way that appears risky to many older individuals has to do with the way the technology is designed. The programs that are often used for social contacts and for posting and spreading images and other digital materials are relatively simple to learn and are visually very appealing. This creates a sense of being in control and possibly also a sense of being in control of the material that is produced and then posted online. Being in a private and safe environment and using a technology that you have mastered and feel in control of may also affect your perceptions of the nature of the technology in question. In a context of this kind,

the technology's potential to disseminate material is not perceived as being fully so extensive and global, which means that what is personal and private is not perceived as being made so completely public as it in fact is. This may constitute part of the explanation for why young people expose themselves to possible risks despite their knowledge and awareness of the technology's more sinister potential. It is important to understand that "new" digital technologies are not new if they have been a natural part of one's everyday experience for the whole, or at least a large part, of one's life. Sharing private images is for many a completely natural part of their contacts with others and is a way of showing these others who they are. Images are a central part of internet and mobile phone use, and technological developments in this area go hand in hand with an interest in the handling of images.

## Voluntary self-exposure among both males and females

It is important to illuminate the existence of possible differences in young males' and females' experiences of the internet and in their approaches and attitudes towards their own internet use. The picture in this area is not entirely unambiguous, but it appears to be the case that young males both have more personal experience of, and a more relaxed attitude towards, the sexual aspects of the internet than their female counterparts. On the other hand, young females tend to a much greater extent to be confronted with internet content of a

sexual nature in situations that they have not actively initiated themselves. Both males and females post images of themselves online. Depending on the age group examined, there is some variation in the extent of differences between the sexes. Those who spend the most time online are also those who are most active in the area of voluntary self-exposure. More than one-quarter of the males in Year 3 of further education are frequent internet users; spend more than five hours a day online, as compared with one-twelfth of the females.

## The internet is important but hazardous for young LGBT people

The internet appears to be particularly important to young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT). On the internet it is possible to seek contacts with other young people with similar experiences and from similar circumstances, or with supportive organisations. It is also possible to privately access information without any major risk of experiencing any unpleasant consequences. Receiving confirmation that one is not alone is important both for our self-esteem and for our general state of health. At the same time, there are negative sides to the internet when it is used for the purposes of loving and/or sexual relationships. For the most part these negative aspects relate to unwanted contacts, in the context of which sexual propositions are commonplace. Other forms of online risk behaviour are also more common within this group of young people,

including for example posting sexual images of oneself or meeting people for sex having first come into contact with them online.

Problematic offline meetings resulting from contacts made online (being persuaded or forced into having sex against one's will) also appear to be more common among young LGBT people by comparison with young people who do not define themselves as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender persons. Young LGBT people, and particularly males, tend to have more personal experience of providing sex in return for some form of payment, to be at higher risk of exposure to internet-related sexual assault or abuse, and to be at higher risk of exposure to bullying or threats via the internet or mobile phones than young heterosexual people.

## Safety information provides no guarantees

Approximately half of the students in Year 3 of further education said that they had received information on "internet safety" but half of these did not feel that the information had been useful. Are there any differences, then, between youths who have been given information

on safe internet use and youths who have not received any such information? There is nothing in the study of students in Year 3 of further education to suggest that students who have received such information exhibit a more circumspect online behaviour, nor that they are any less exposed to negative experiences.

# Discussion

## The internet – a delight or a risk?

Since its arrival in Sweden in the mid 1990s, the internet has come to play an ever more important role in people's lives, not least in the lives of young people, and the internet has today become an integrated and quite natural part of everyday life. Those who are today aged 25 were born in 1984. The emergence of the internet in Sweden is often dated to 1994, when those born in 1984 turned ten years of age. For those born later than 1984, the idea of a society with no internet access is quite alien. "New" digital technology is not new if it has been a natural part of your everyday experience for a large part of your life. Sharing private images is for many a completely natural part of their contacts with others and is a way of showing them who you are. Images are a central part of internet and mobile phone use and technological developments in this area go hand in hand with an interest in the handling of images.

The internet is used in a large number of different ways – for establishing and maintaining social contacts, for accessing and disseminating information and for sharing private files and documents with other users. For many young people, the internet also serves as an arena where they can present themselves and their lives both to people they know and to people they have never met. Visitors to home pages and internet communities can view pictures of the individual and question, and maybe also of his or her family, friends, partner, pets and so on.

There is a generation gap however between those who have experienced the emergence and expansion of today's internet society and the present generation of young adults who were more or less born into a world of which the internet already constituted a quite natural part. It is well known that there are also negative sides to such an unregulated and open arena as the internet.

As a rule, youths who have grown up with this medium have learned to deal with some of the problems identified by the adult community. One such problem is that of contacts made by unknown men involving unwanted sexual suggestions and propositions. Although young males also describe experiences of this kind, such sexual contacts are first and foremost something that girls and young women are forced to deal with. Dunkels' (2009) research on children and the internet shows that factors identified by adults as serious internet-related problems, such as sex, pornography and the risk of exposure to abuse, are rated low on young people's own lists of problems associated with the internet, with factors such as viruses, "technical problems" and the costs of games instead being viewed as the most concrete problems encountered by young people themselves.

The internet is often even more important for young people who do not identify with the heteronormative values that in many ways dominate society, i.e. for those young people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender individuals. The interview study focused on young LGBT people that is included in the *See me* report shows that it is not uncommon for young LGBT people to feel that they are alone and not understood by others, and that they largely lack any form of social support. The internet constitutes an efficient means of seeking information on LGBT issues and LGBT organisations, and it provides a relatively easy and safe means of coming into contact with other LGBT people. For young LGBT people, the internet provides a context where heteronormativity does not constitute the self-evident value base.

## Sexual self-exposure

There are different ways of describing sexual self-exposure. It may involve people showing the whole or parts of their bodies in photos or film clips with the objective of arousing sexual or erotic interest. The situation or arena in which the self-exposure takes place is of major significance for whether or not the images are perceived as sexual. It is not always the case that the individual involved perceives him- or herself as wanting to send a sexual message. Images may however be interpreted as sexual by those who view them, thus creating a form of unconscious sexual self-exposure. Thus the act itself, the actor's intention, the context and the viewer's interpretation are all essential elements in whether or not an act can be defined as sexual self-exposure. There may, for example, be differences in the way the same scantily clad image or pose is perceived by people from different generations.

Besides websites with a clear sexual focus on which images can be posted, images of young people that may

be interpreted as sexual can also be found on websites with a more general youth focus. These images do not portray naked bodies but may nonetheless be perceived as sexually provocative as a result of the type of poses employed and an emphasis on the subjects' sexual attributes. Young people can post images on such websites, where they are then judged and graded by other visitors to the site. For some people, showing off one's body, or exposing oneself on the internet using more or less provocative imagery does not constitute a strange way of presenting oneself and nor is it naturally viewed as a risk-taking behaviour. Sexual self-exposure can also assume a more physical, real-time form, with people exposing themselves via a web-camera. The reasons for doing so can vary. Some may view participating in such exposure together with others as an exciting and sexually arousing activity, but there are also examples of cases where individuals are persuaded against their will to expose themselves via a web-camera.

## How common is self-exposure?

How common then is it for young people to voluntarily expose themselves sexually online? It is important to bear in mind that the concept "sexy pictures" can mean different things to different people. Among the students in Year 3 of further education, just over four percent stated that they had posted sexual images of themselves online or via a mobile phone *during the past twelve months*, and there were no differences between males and females. Among the same group of students, twelve percent of males and sixteen percent of females reported ever having exposed themselves via a web-camera. In the group of 16–25 year olds, just under eight percent reported that they had *ever* posted sexual images or film clips of themselves online, and it was more common for females (9 percent) than males (6 percent) to report having done so.

Almost all young people use the internet every day, most of them for a number of hours. In order to select a group to be identified as high-frequency internet users, a threshold has been specified of over five hours of internet use per day. This group comprises approximately fifteen percent of 18-year-olds. High-frequency internet users have posted sexual images of themselves on line to a greater extent than others. Although it is more common for high-frequency internet users to have experience of online sexual self-exposure, they comprise a much smaller group than those who spend less time online. In the survey of students in Year 3 of further education, eighteen percent reported that a person whom they only knew via the internet had in the

last twelve months asked them to send sexual images of themselves. Experiences of this kind were significantly more common among the females (23 percent) than among the males (12 percent). Of those who had been asked to send sexual images of themselves, seventeen percent stated that they had also done so. In total, this means that approximately 2.8 percent of 18-year-olds have sent sexual images of themselves in response to such a request. Males had done so more often than females.

Clear differences emerge when young heterosexual people are compared with young LGBT people, with experiences of sexual self-exposure being significantly more common within the latter group. On the other hand, no clear systematic patterns were found in the level of self-exposure based on socio-economic background, Swedish or overseas background, or the region in which respondents live. The study conducted among members of the RFSL aged between 18 and 25 years found a considerably larger proportion of persons who had posted sexual images of themselves on the internet or via mobile phones than was found in the other studies conducted (Priebe & Svedin 2009). Substantial differences were found between groups with different gender identities. Among the young men, 35 percent had posted images of themselves online or via mobile phone as compared with eight percent of the young women. Furthermore, 44 percent reported that they had exposed themselves in the flesh via a web-camera or mobile phone.

## Views of young men and women

The internet may be viewed as providing an opportunity to reduce differences in how young men and women are able to act as sexual beings. The fact that both sexes are able to test out their sexuality and to establish contacts without being governed by the sexuality norms that exist in the rest of society might lead to increased equality between the sexes. Females find themselves exposed to unwanted sexual propositions and approaches online to a much greater extent than males, however. Nor does the internet appear to constitute any major exception to the general social norm relating to whether young women can expose themselves sexually without the risk of being regarded as "loose".

While young females who post sexual pictures of themselves online are described as immature, vulgar and a bit stupid and are associated with an image of being easy victims for boys and older men, young males who post sexy images of themselves are regarded as cool and self-assured. The fact that there are differences between the ways in which young females and young males

expose themselves online is also clearly visible on different youth websites, where the images posted by girls tend to be more sexually provocative, and as a rule show more sexual attributes, than those posted by boys.

The study also shows that there are differences in the ways girls and boys started to expose themselves sexually. While the path to sexual self-exposure among young males had often gone via looking for pornography, the females' socialisation into sexual self-exposure had first and foremost been affected by peers and was of a collective and social character. Young females are also more concerned with achieving artistic objectives in connection with the images they post of themselves, something which is uncommon among young males. Similarly, the need for acknowledgement associated with online self-exposure appears to be greater among girls and young women than it is among boys and young men. In the media coverage of internet-related issues, the situation faced by girls online is often emphasised as a cause for concern.

## Why do young people expose themselves online?

How are we to understand why certain young people choose to expose themselves sexually on the internet? The qualitative studies that are presented in the report include a number of recurrent themes found in young people's own explanations of why they expose themselves sexually online. One explanation that appears consistently in these studies is that sexual self-exposure can serve to improve young people's self-esteem as a result of the acknowledgement they receive from others online. This may involve either improving and reinforcing self-confidence where this is already quite strong, or using the positive response received as a means of working to improve low levels of self-confidence or of dealing with various types of negative body complex. Sexual self-exposure becomes a quick and easy way for young people to attract positive feedback about their bodies.

The quantitative studies conducted for the purposes of the report show that those who report online sexual self-exposure include a significant over-representation of young people who state that they worry about not being good enough, about their appearance and about their weight. It may seem paradoxical that people suffering from low self-esteem, amongst other things in relation to their own bodies, would choose to expose themselves in this way on the internet. But since posting increasingly sexual images of oneself generally produces an increasingly positive response, it seems likely that young people are attracted to produce increasingly provocative images of themselves in order to receive the

response they are looking for, i.e. positive comments about their bodies that will improve their self-esteem.

For some, their self-exposure constitutes part of a sexual lifestyle, which involves sexual curiosity and provides opportunities to test out various activities in the sexual arena, with online self-exposure becoming part of their sexual lives. Among those who post images of themselves on sexually focused internet communities, social contacts are also reported to constitute an important factor. These websites do not only serve a sexual function but are just as much a place to establish contacts and create a network for the purposes of socialising more generally. In these contexts, sexual self-exposure becomes something of an everyday phenomenon, a lifestyle into which one becomes socialised.

A study conducted among young bloggers also presents explanations as to why young people expose themselves sexually despite an apparently good awareness of the possibilities and risks associated with the technology involved. In the moment, it is easy for young people to have a sense that they are in full control as a result of the way the technology is designed. It is simple, and the context is often visually very appealing. Being in an environment that they perceive as safe and private, combined with a feeling of mastery and control over what they are doing, may affect young people's perceptions so that the technology's potential to disseminate material feels less extensive and global than is actually the case.

## Sex – not just online

The report presents a discussion of the sexualisation, or even pornographisation, of the public sphere. The concept of sex itself, of what is regarded as "sexy", changes over time. For sex to continue to be enticing, shocking, exciting and attractive/arousing, we have to keep pushing the envelope. Virtually all forms of cultural content that are directed at young people are dominated by sexual codes and symbols: the press, music, advertising, fashion etc. People speak of a "spill-over process" in which the porn industry is expanding into an increasingly large part of the market for popular culture and becoming a more or less integrated element in the content and imagery of media directed at young people.

This trend may be said to have involved a normalisation of pornography in popular culture and thus in an important and influential part of the lives of young people. The internet is regarded as having played a decisive role in the sexualisation of the public sphere witnessed over the course of the last decade. The

volume has been turned up and there has been an increase in the level of both supply and accessibility. In turn, this increased accessibility has led to an increased level of acceptance of sex and pornography, not least among young people who spend a large part of their time engaging in online activities. When we are repeatedly exposed to something, it becomes normalised, and as a rule we learn to deal with it. We can see that young people's more relaxed attitude towards sex is probably a result of the increased accessibility of sex, which is in part but not entirely due to the internet. Amongst other things, traditional advertising and the mass media in the form of television and the press often have a very "relaxed" attitude towards sex, and being confronted with headlines about sex scandals and shocking sex stories on newspaper placards and the front pages of the tabloids is very much the rule rather than the exception.

## Risks and unwanted sexual exposure

For the majority of young people, the sexual activities engaged in via interactive media take place between two or more consenting participants. Meeting someone online and then meeting up with them offline and having sex, for example, is not necessarily a high-risk activity. Relationships that are formed by means of online-dating often follow precisely this pattern. In the public debate, however, young people's online sexual activities have as a rule come to be associated with risk. The possibilities associated with interactive technologies also constitute part of the risk associated with the internet. It is simple to publish or distribute both images of your own and those of others. In the study conducted among students in Year 3 of further education, approximately two percent had experienced having images distributed against their will *during the twelve month period prior to the survey*, with males reporting such experiences somewhat more often than females. In the youth survey of persons aged 16–25, 2.4 percent reported having had sexual images distributed against their will. Differences between the sexes and between younger and older youths were small. Among the students in Year 3 of further education, slightly under one percent reported having distributed sexual images of others against their will, or without their knowledge, during the preceding year. Here the difference between males and females was large, however, with considerably more males reporting that they had distributed sexual pictures or film clips of others. In the broader youth survey, just over one percent reported that they had posted images of others,

and here too the proportion of males who had done so was larger than that among the females.

The perceived risks that young people associate with the internet need not only be related to unwanted contacts and sexual propositions, however. They may also involve a fear that a date with someone they have previously only met online might be painfully quiet or turn out to be a failure, that the relationships won't work out or that the proposed sexual encounter will not be as good as they had hoped. It is this type of issue rather than any other that the young LGBT people interviewed mentioned when discussions focused on the risks linked to internet use. Talks of the risks of the internet are thus more often associated with awkward situations or unfulfilled hopes, rather than with sexual victimisation. The studies conducted in connection with the report show that young people as a rule are aware of the risks associated with online activities. They do not as a rule view these risks as something they are passively exposed to, but rather as something they learn to deal with in various ways. Generally speaking, youths do not feel that they expose themselves in ways that they do not wish to or that they have no control over. Many are aware that images and films can be reproduced and used by other people, for other purposes and in quite different contexts than those they themselves have chosen. Several young people have stated that over time you learn how to deal with this and that it therefore does not really constitute a problem.

Publishing information, including details about oneself and one's everyday life is perceived as relatively natural and not as something particularly risky or strange. It is also clear that young people's perceptions as to what is regarded as sexually provocative and risky differ from those of adults. If the image of the internet conveyed by the "adult world" does not correspond to young

people's own experiences, there is a risk that they will not assimilate information on the risks that actually do exist. An over-dramatic focus on the dangers of the internet may lead to a risk that the competencies young people have developed to avoid or deal with the problems they encounter online will be ignored.

## Unwanted sexual contacts

Over recent years, it has become quite common, when talking about young people and the internet, to focus on the unwanted contacts from older men that young people, and particularly girls, are forced to deal with. Several of the studies confirm that young people are often contacted online by people with sexual intentions. In the youth questionnaire survey, however, slightly under one-third of 16 to 25-year-olds stated that they had ever been contacted online by someone who had tried to get them to talk about sex, send pictures or do something in front of a web-camera when they themselves did not want to. While almost half of the females reported experiences of this kind, only thirteen percent of the males did so. It was also more common for young women aged between sixteen and nineteen to have been contacted in this way than it was for their older counterparts.

It is not only older persons who are responsible for contacts of this kind, but also other young people. One-quarter of the 18-year-olds report having sent unpleasant text messages via their mobile phones, six percent have spread rumours or written mean things about other people online, and approximately two percent have electronically or digitally spread sexual images or film clips of others against their will or without their knowledge, or have written or posted unpleasant things on others' internet profiles. The study of young LGBT people confirms the finding that sexual propositions, particularly from older boys or men, are part of everyday life online. Those who are responsible for these contacts are as a rule quite open about their age and their intentions, a finding which has also been reported in other studies. It appears to be relatively uncommon to be contacted by people who then show themselves to have lied about their identity.

## Strategies to reduce risk

The studies presented in the report show that young people are aware about risky behaviours online and that they have developed strategies to minimise these risks. Internet users are often encouraged to be circumspect about giving out personal information. The strategies used by young people themselves however show ambivalence towards the idea of staying anonymous online. On the one hand young people want to be able to feel free to express themselves, both in words and pictures, without risking, for example, that their own families will find out. On the other hand, young people say that being open about their names and providing images of themselves in the context of their communications with others constitute a way of showing they are serious and do not have hidden intentions. A strategy of openness thus becomes a way of avoiding being shut out by the "security filters" of their online counterparts. It is a question of trying to avoid appearing suspicious, since anonymity may be perceived as indicating that you have something to hide.

The strategies used to establish the identity of those whom young people come into contact with online are similar to those used in connection with new contacts established outside the internet, and involve a process of gradually becoming closer to the other person. Giving out personal information is sometimes also a necessity in order to be able to develop a relationship in the direction you want it to take. Thus the strategies actually employed by young people are in some cases quite the opposite of the accepted view of what constitutes safe and unsafe internet use respectively. In the majority of cases, contacts that are established online follow a fairly traditional pattern for the initiation and development of relationships. There is nothing in the various data sets to suggest that it is common for young people to indiscriminately contact people they do not know, to share personal information with them or to arrange to meet them offline.

Several of the young people included in the study of voluntary self-exposure emphasise the importance of presenting oneself in a tasteful manner. They want to

produce images that are artistic and that will not be directly associated with pornography. Thus sexual self-exposure is rarely unregulated but rather takes place within the framework of a series of rules and limits, and those who expose themselves thus exercise control over their images, despite the fact that these images are accessible online. As a rule, the girls who post images of themselves on online communities exercise more control over which images they post and who can see them than the boys, who do not appear to experience the same type of problems in association with sexual self-exposure.

It is generally quite easy on the internet to present yourself as being something or someone you are not. Young people have themselves developed sophisticated strategies to expose older individuals who are attempting to present themselves as youths. These are not techniques that have been developed and taught to young people by adults. By asking questions, about beauty products, for example, or current music, films or "docu-soaps", which older men are assumed not to know very much about, they are able to expose whether the person they are in contact with is in fact what he or she claims to be (Priebe 2008, Dunkels 2007).

## Sex for compensation

The issue of young people providing sex in return for payment gives rise to strong feelings. Until just a few years ago, relatively few studies had been focused on young people who receive compensation for sex. The majority of earlier studies have instead focused on adult prostitutes, and primarily on women. A governmental inquiry on the sexual exploitation of children in Sweden (SOU 2004:71), which showed that one percent of the females in Year 3 of further education had some experience of receiving compensation for sex, as well as 1.8 percent of the males, attracted a great deal of attention. No representative survey on the issue of selling sex had previously been conducted among young people in Sweden. The study conducted among students in Year 3 of further education for the purposes of the current report shows no appreciable increase in the proportion of youths who state that they have accepted some form of payment in return for sex. The proportion of males who reported having done so had declined by 0.1 percentage points to 1.7 percent, while the same proportion among the females had increased by 0.2 percentage points to 1.2 percent. For the group as a whole, this means a change from 1.4 to 1.5 percent between 2004 and 2009. The average age at which the youths report having sold sex for the first time is 14.4 years, which is lower than the age recorded in the 2004 study, which was 15.9 years. Other studies that have been published over recent years present similar results, showing that for many, the age of debut for providing sex in return for payment lies in the mid-teenage years (Priebe & Svedin 2004, Abellson & Hulusjö 2008,

Cyberhus 2008). The age of sexual debut, i.e. the age at which youths have sexual intercourse for the first time, also differs between those who have sold sex and those who have not done so. The age of sexual debut for those who state that they have sold sex is approximately two years lower than that of those who have never sold sex, at 13.3 years as compared to 15.4 years.

In the youth survey focused on young people aged between 16 and 25 years, 1.7 percent stated that they had ever accepted some form of payment for sex. This survey includes a broader sample of older young people who have thus had more time to make their debut and thus to have had such experiences. This survey found no difference in the extent to which male and female respondents had provided sex in return for payment. By contrast, there are substantial differences in the extent to which male and female respondents report having themselves *paid* for sex, with the older male respondents being the group who had done so to the greatest extent. The proportion of older male respondents (20-25 years of age) who had provided payment in return for sex was found to be 3.8 percent, as compared with 1.1 percent among the younger male respondents (16-19 years of age). Among the younger female respondents, only around a tenth of one percent report experience of having given some form of payment in return for sex.

The most common form of payment among both males and females is money. Other types of payment included food and lodging, alcohol, cigarettes and drugs, and also such items as clothing and jewellery.

## Attitudes towards sex in return for compensation

What are young people's attitudes towards the possibility of selling sexual services or of paying for them? The proportion of young males with a relatively permissive attitude is significantly larger than the proportion of young females who express such an attitude. By comparison with the situation in 2004, the survey of youths in Year 3 of further education shows an increase in the proportion who expresses a positive attitude in relation to providing various forms of sex in return for payment. Among the 16–25 year olds too we find confirmation of these sex differences, with approximately five percent of the females stating that they might consider accepting some form of payment for sex. The corresponding proportion among the males is sixteen percent. There are no differences between youths in their teenage years and young adults aged

between 20 and 25 years, but if the comparison is broken down by both sex and age we find that the proportion of males who state that they might consider providing sex in return for payment is larger within the older age-group, whereas the situation is the reverse among the females, with a larger proportion of the younger age-group expressing a positive attitude. These differences are relatively small however. Young people aged between 16 and 25 who have posted sexual images online, either of themselves or of others without their knowledge, express more permissive attitudes towards the idea of sex in return for payment, and they have also accepted some form of payment for providing sexual services more often than young people who have never posted images of this kind online.

## The technology's significance for sexual exploitation

The internet has become the most important arena for the supply and purchase of sexual services. There can be no doubt that technologies such as the internet and mobile phones play a decisive role for contacts between buyers and sellers. However, it is difficult to draw any conclusions as to whether the internet is responsible for the more positive *attitudes* found among young people towards buying and selling sex. Nor is there anything to suggest that the internet in itself has led to any increase in the number of young people who have actually sold sexual services. The technology exists and is used to establish contacts between buyers and sellers, but it is

not the reason that young people sell sex. The proportion of students in Year 3 of further education with experience of having sold sex is relatively small and has remained largely unchanged over the past six years despite an increase in both internet access and the use of the internet. The proportion of young people aged between 15 and 24 who use the internet on an average day increased from 48 percent to 86 percent between 2004 and 2008. This represents almost a doubling of the proportion of internet users between the two years in which the studies in question were conducted (Nordicom-Sveriges Internetbarometer).

## The risk group

Even though young people tend to be well-aware of the opportunities that the technology provides and the risks associated with its use, and also tend to consciously relate to these risks, there are nonetheless youths who

fail to cope with the dangers and who have instead found themselves caught up in different forms of sexual exposure and exploitation.

### Difficulties setting limits

As has already been mentioned, setting limits for one's own behaviour is one of the strategies young people use as a means of coping with the risks associated with their use of the internet, and the vast majority of young people who have had negative experiences online have difficulties setting limits for themselves. These difficulties are not only related to internet activities, but also to these youths' everyday lives more generally, irrespective of the context. The difficulties youths have in setting limits are often also linked to low self-esteem and the need for acknowledgement that we have described as constituting one explanation for why young people engage in sexual self-exposure. Where such limits are set is naturally quite individual. Having problems saying no can occur in a wide array of different situations, ranging from not wanting to disappoint someone you have met online at an offline meeting by refusing them sex, despite the fact that you don't in fact want to have sex with them, to exposing your body online after a period of badgering, compliments or perhaps having been offered some form of payment.

The group who report having accepted some form of payment in return for sex are distinguishable in the sense that they show more signs of externalising, limit-testing and limit-breaking behaviours than others, with these expressing themselves in significantly higher levels of smoking, alcohol use and various forms of rule-breaking behaviour, such as thefts, breaking and entering (primarily among the males) and drug use (primarily among the females). This group also reported a higher level of interest in pornography, and expressed a more permissive attitude towards the possibility of themselves selling sex in the future or a greater level of acceptance for others doing so. The lives of these individuals were significantly more sexualised and they have themselves subjected others to sexual violations of various kinds to a greater extent than young people with no experience of providing sex in return for some form of payment.

### Problematic social relations

Young people who have had negative experiences also exhibit signs of problems in their social contacts. They may experience difficulties with peers, and they feel lonely. In such a situation, opportunities for acknowledgement and for developing a sense of belonging may instead be sought online. There are also often problems in the relationship between these youths and their parents. These problems are not necessarily associated with a difficult social or financial situation, but are often rather the result of a lack of contact and communication with the parents. The quantitative studies also show

large differences between young people who have experience of sexual self-exposure or of sex in return for payment and those without experiences of this kind. These differences are found in relation to both health and the youths' sense of satisfaction with their lives, in the strength of their social ties and in their financial situation. There may be reciprocal effects at work here too, whereby the experience of self-exposure, for example, may itself be causing the young people to feel greater levels of dissatisfaction with their lives and with themselves.

## Exposure to sexual abuse

According to Priebe and Svedin's studies, sexual abuse in childhood is the factor that is most prominently correlated with selling sex. Of the surveyed students in Year 3 of further education who reported having sold sex at some point (51 individuals), 78 percent had also been exposed to sexual abuse. The data show that of those who had been exposed to some form of sexual abuse, seven percent had also sold sex, as compared with 0.4 percent of the youths who had not been subjected to

sexual abuse. This means that it is fully eighteen times as common for youths with experience of sexual abuse to have, or to be at risk of having, experience of selling sex. The study shows that in 80 percent of cases, the abuse (or the first instance of abuse in those cases where there had been repeated incidents) occurred either earlier than, or during, the year in which the first incident of selling sex took place.

## Future challenges

In the context of future work to prevent young people from online victimisation, there are a number of factors that should be emphasised in particular. One recurrent theme in the different studies conducted in connection with the National Board for Youth Affairs' report is that young people feel that there are differences between their own views of the internet and of what is considered sexually provocative and the views of the adult world. According to young people, adults have an exaggerated conception of the risks associated with the internet. Young people's internet use, and their sexual activities, is governed by codes that may appear alien to members of the adult world. The internet is an arena where limits are tested. Language and actions that may appear shocking to older individuals can easily be misinterpreted. It is important that the concerns of certain parents about their children's internet activities are not allowed to negatively affect the online integrity of young people. For young LGBT people, who may not have 'come out' to their parents, or whose parents have not accepted their sexual or gender identity, the issue of parental controls on internet use is a particularly important one. Young people's exploration of their sexuality may appear particularly worrying to certain adults precisely because it is taking place online, but for many young people the internet is invaluable both as a resource in the context of their sexual development and as a means of establishing sexual contacts.

The fact that young people feel that the adult world's view of the internet does not reflect their own experiences may also involve a risk that they will ignore information that may actually be relevant to them. There is also a risk that they may experience stronger feelings of self-blame if they do have negative experiences online. The description of young people who have experienced online victimisation shows quite clearly that the majority of them also have problems in their offline lives. The internet is not an isolated phenomenon, but is

rather an arena in which social relations and contacts may appear different, but where most of what happens is very similar to what happens in the offline world. The internet has however expanded the opportunities available to adults wishing to contact children and young people for sexual purposes.

Although the results presented in the report show that young people with problems in other areas are at higher risk of getting into difficulties online, it is important to be aware that other, apparently less vulnerable young people can also have negative experiences on the internet. There are also differences between the young people who have experienced sexual victimisation online and those who have been sexually victimised in other environments. As a rule, those who have been victimised online have been more active and have exhibited higher levels of risk-taking behaviour than other young victims. This may lead to them experiencing higher levels of self-blame in relation to what has happened. In order to develop a correct understanding of, and to be able to combat and prevent, the victimisation of young people online, it is important to view the internet in context and to be aware of how young people themselves view the benefits and risks associated with internet use. The concrete benefits that are associated with internet use for the vast majority of young people cannot be ignored.

In the work to prevent the online victimisation of young people it is important to focus attention on younger age groups. The report produced by the National Board for Youth Affairs has focused first and foremost on charting the situation of young people over the age of fifteen, but it also includes information relating to youths from the age of thirteen. The descriptions provided by older youths of having learned strategies for safe internet use over a number of years indicate that the youngest internet users may be at greater risk of exposure to victimisation, since their lower

levels of knowledge and experience, together with a less well-developed capacity for self-reflection, may make it more difficult for them to set limits.

In the context of preventive work, it is also important to look at the online activities of young people themselves. The report has shown that the majority of young people are aware of the risks associated with the internet and have well-developed strategies to reduce these risks when they are online. In some cases these strategies are quite the opposite of what the adult world usually teaches about how to minimise risks. Advice or suggestions that do not take the target group's experiences and values into consideration risk being ignored or can even lead to a decline in young people's faith in advice of this kind. It is also important that adults who work with young people with experience of victimisation develop a better knowledge of how they should approach their treatment work. In our meetings with prostitution units and the child and young people's psychiatric sector, we were told of a lack of knowledge about both sexual abuse in general and the internet in particular among the adult professionals who meet these children. This problem has also been highlighted in other studies (Jonsson, Warfvinge & Banck 2009). Special efforts are required to ensure that practitioners also detect victimisation among young males.

Similarly, it is important to understand that young people with internet-related problems are often experiencing problems in other areas of their lives that may need to be identified and dealt with. It is also important to talk about a healthy approach to the internet in the context of the public debate. One of those interviewed also described how exaggerating the risks associated with the internet may lead to a risk that the competencies which young people have developed to avoid these risks will be ignored.

Besides ensuring that various types of practitioners are well-prepared when their work brings them into

contact with young people who have had, or who are at risk of having negative online experiences, it is also important to reach the group that is actually at risk for such negative online experiences at an early stage. Early measures are of central importance. Prominent researchers working in this area advocate that preventive measures should first and foremost be directed at young people themselves and not at their parents or other adults, since the young people who are most at risk often do not have a good relationship with the adults around them, and are not receptive to advice from these adults. These researchers prescribe focused measures directed at those young people who may be assumed to belong to the risk group, and that preventive measures should be focused more on the interactive aspects of the technology, and their consequences in both the short and the long term, and less on the risks associated with disseminating personal information. The period of youth is characterised by curiosity, and engaging in behaviours that occasionally exceed limits is in itself nothing new. The internet and mobile phone technologies provide an excellent means of accessing information and of establishing and maintaining social relations. There is a risk however that our approach to the use of these technologies does not reflect the possibilities that they have created for documenting, saving and disseminating information and images in an undesirable way. It is thus possible to become exploited without actually being aware that it is happening or being able to do anything about it. It is also important that measures to minimise victimisation do not only focus on limiting young people's use of these technologies, but also on the perpetrators, both young and old. Those who violate others or place them in difficult and harmful situations that can cause damage, perhaps for a long time to come, should be held accountable for their actions.

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project manager **Maria Nyman**  
translation **David Shannon**  
graphic design **Christián Serrano**  
cover illustration **Erica Jacobson**

distribution **Ungdomsstyrelsen, Box 17801, 118 94 Stockholm**  
tel **+46 8 566 219 00**, fax **+46 8 566 219 98**  
e-mail **info@ungdomsstyrelsen.se**  
website **www.ungdomsstyrelsen.se**



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