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Report Calls Online Threats to Children Overblown

By [BRAD STONE](#)

The Internet may not be such a dangerous place for children after all.

A task force created by 49 state attorneys general to look into the problem of sexual solicitation of children online has concluded that there really is not a significant problem.

The findings ran counter to popular perceptions of online dangers as reinforced by depictions in the news media like [NBC's](#) "To Catch a Predator" series. One attorney general was quick to criticize the group's report.

The panel, the Internet Safety Technical Task Force, was charged with examining the extent of the threats children face on social networks like [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#), amid widespread fears that adults were using these popular Web sites to deceive and prey on children.

But the report concluded that the problem of bullying among children, both online and offline, poses a far more serious challenge than the sexual solicitation of minors by adults.

"This shows that social networks are not these horribly bad neighborhoods on the Internet," said John Cardillo, chief executive of Sentinel Tech Holding, which maintains a sex offender database and was part of the task force. "Social networks are very much like real-world communities that are comprised mostly of good people who are there for the right reasons."

The 278-page report, released Tuesday, was the result of a year of meetings between dozens of academics, experts in childhood safety and executives of 30 companies, including [Yahoo](#), [AOL](#), MySpace and Facebook.

The task force, led by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at [Harvard University](#), looked at scientific data on online sexual predators and found that children and teenagers were unlikely to be propositioned by adults online. In the cases that do exist, the report said, teenagers are typically willing participants and are already at risk because of poor home environments, substance abuse or other problems.

Not everyone was happy with the conclusions. [Richard Blumenthal](#), the Connecticut attorney general, who has forcefully pursued the issue and helped to create the task force, said he disagreed with the report. Mr. Blumenthal said it "downplayed the predator threat," relied on outdated research and failed to provide a specific plan for improving the safety of social networking.

"Children are solicited every day online," Mr. Blumenthal said. "Some fall prey, and the results are tragic. That harsh reality defies the statistical academic research underlying the report."

In what social networks may view as something of an exoneration after years of pressure from law

enforcement, the report said sites like MySpace and Facebook “do not appear to have increased the overall risk of solicitation.”

Attorneys general like Mr. Blumenthal and Roy Cooper of North Carolina publicly accused the social networks of facilitating the activities of pedophiles and pushed them to adopt measures to protect their youngest users. Citing studies that showed tens of thousands of convicted sex offenders were using MySpace, they pressured the networks to purge those people from their membership databases.

The attorneys general also charged the task force with evaluating technologies that might play a role in enhancing safety for children online. An advisory board composed of academic computer scientists and forensics experts was created within the task force to look at technologies and ask companies in the industry to submit their child-protection systems.

Among the systems the technology board looked at included age verification technologies that try to authenticate the identities and ages of children and prevent adults from contacting them. But the board concluded that such systems “do not appear to offer substantial help in protecting minors from sexual solicitation.”

One problem is that it is difficult to verify the ages and identities of children because they do not have driver’s licenses or insurance.

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