

The Internet

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Over the past decade the internet has become an essential tool for most Americans. It has enhanced the way we communicate with each other and it has given us an opportunity to learn about different ideas and values. Just recently the internet allowed me to skip the traffic and heavy crowds by doing my Christmas shopping without leaving my office. Through all its benefits and conveniences, the internet also has a very dark side. It is this dark side that has allowed individuals unlimited access to children all over the world.

In 2001 in Middleton, Massachusetts Christopher Reardon was convicted of molesting 29 boys when his computer at work was searched; over 10,000 child pornography pictures were discovered. September 2006, a 17 year old boy was held against his will and sexually assaulted by a 58 year old man he met on MySpace.com. Closer to home, in 2004 a Department of Defense analyst working in the Pentagon flew down to San Antonio to have sex with a 14 year old girl after a meeting was set over the internet. This individual used email, chat rooms, and even cameras to communicate with an undercover officer. More recently, on November 8th 2006, the San Antonio Express-News reported that a 35 year old male nurse was caught with child pornography on two of his home computers. He is now facing a 10 year sentence.

These stories are just a few examples of millions that are reported on a daily basis. Through local news reports and national television specials, we have all become aware of such websites such as MySpace.com, as well as the way adults continuously attempt to have sex with minors. These sex traveler stories can be seen nightly on our local news. These individuals who believe they are talking to a teenager are usually talking to an undercover FBI agent or local police officer. Through constant media attention, you would think that these individuals would know by now that they are talking to an officer and not a teenager. This shows the attitude of these individuals and the depth of the sickness. They do not believe that they will get caught and chances are this isn't their first time. We have to remember that the ones that are seen on the news are just the ones that get caught, there are too many that are never discovered.

The question that needs to be examined has to be whether the threat of internet sex offenders is real? And if the threat is real, what can parents and guardians do to help protect our children? Over the next few issues of *Today's Catholic*, I will discuss the findings of a report issued on September 1, 2006 by the Texas Council of Sex Offender Treatment titled *Online Solicitation of Children: A Report Regarding the Use of the Internet to Facilitate the Commission of Sex Crimes Including Recommendations for Ensuring Child Safety*.

This report will help examine the threat of online predators by dissecting the way their victims are targeted and groomed. It will also give parents and guardians strategies for dealing with this growing epidemic.