Your computer could open door to cyberpredators

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They're hacking into computers, secretly watching girls on webcams, and using sophisticated techniques to disguise child pornography and thwart law enforcement. Across the globe, men with advanced computer and Internet skills are victimizing children using tactics that most people can't grasp.

Consider Patrick Connolly and Ivory Dickerson.

In the years the two men targeted teen girls, FBI agents say, they hacked into their victims' computers and extorted girls into making child pornography of themselves.

Experts say their cases should serve as a warning to computer users everywhere.

"It is absolutely something that people should be concerned about," said Mark McLaughlin, president of the International High Technology Crime Investigation Association, based in Roseville, Calif.

"The Internet opens, at a minimum, a window into the personal space of the household, and if misused, a door," McLaughlin said. "Once anything is typed onto a keyboard and sent out to others, the originator loses all control of where that data might end up or how it will be used."

Connolly and Dickerson are accused of victimizing at least four girls from the Orlando, Fla., area. And investigators say there may be

hundreds, even thousands, of other victims they have yet to identify. One of their alleged victims was told her sister would be hurt if she didn't provide nude photos of herself.

"We're talking about young victims who felt pressured and often believed that if they provided some things to these individuals that they would be left alone," FBI Agent Nick Savage said at a recent news briefing. "When in fact, it was really just the beginning."

Connolly, a former military contractor, and Dickerson, a former civil engineer, could take control of their victims' computers, investigators said. They could delete files, see what the girls were typing and secretly watch girls on their webcams.

"Once they were able to, basically, get into one computer, it was a snowball effect," Savage said. "They were able to target other individuals by assuming the identity of an individual whose computer they've taken over."

Computer-crimes experts say it's difficult to tell exactly how many people are victimized by Internet predators.

Cybercrimes are underreported and legal definitions of "cybercrime" vary, said Sameer Hinduja, a Florida Atlantic University professor who studies cybercrimes.

But the FBI reports that more incidents of online child pornography and exploitation are being identified for investigation than ever before.

The number of FBI cases opened under the Innocent Images National Initiative -- a multiagency operation geared to combat child porn and exploitation -- has increased by more than 2,000 percent since 1996.

The FBI opened 113 Innocent Images cases in 1996. By 2007, that figure skyrocketed to about 2,445.

Though Hinduja thinks law enforcement is making progress, he noted that their efforts are not "as proactive as we would like."

Susan Brenner, a University of Dayton law professor and cybercrimes expert, said people often forget that a computer can be a weapon.

"What the Internet has let people do is hurt people in new and dreadful ways," she said. "People start losing control of their lives. The psychological, the emotional harm is very real."

In July 2007, Mark Wayne Miller, a registered sex offender from Ohio, was sentenced to 25 years in prison for secretly watching and recording webcam footage of girls involved in sexually explicit conduct. He was also charged with persuading girls to perform sexually for him in front of their webcams.

Miller obtained girls' passwords to a popular Internet portal and then secretly accessed their webcam sessions. Court records state Miller looked for log-in names that were likely to be minors.

Miller, now 48, also pretended to be a young man and built relationships with girls he met online, including a 16-year-old Pennsylvania girl. According to his plea agreement, Miller persuaded the unsuspecting teens to perform sexually in front of their webcams. He even distributed some of it to others.

Later this month, seven men will be sentenced in North Florida for their involvement in a sophisticated international child-pornography ring.

During the January trial, an Australian constable testified that the group

used a complex system of pseudonyms and screening tests for new members to avoid detection, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

One of the ways they tried to thwart law enforcement was to use encrypted messages so that the public -- and police -- couldn't see what they were discussing.

FBI Director Robert Mueller said during a conference in August that members of the ring "boasted of being 'untouchable.'"

The good news, experts say, is that cases involving online predators with such advanced computer skills are not the norm.

But when such crimes do occur, they often involve a lot of victims, Hinduja said.

And it's these sensational cases that "opens our eyes," he said. "We kind of need these reminders that people need to be wise about who they talk to online and what they download."

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