



Column 27 March 2001

Are you the one in four?

'UK politicians claim that "as many as one in five children who use internet chat rooms are approached by paedophiles". The evidence proves something quite different.'

by **Sandy Starr**

'As many as one in five children who use internet chat rooms are approached by paedophiles.' (1)

So claims UK Liberal Democrat MP Paul Burstow. He presented the statistic during prime minister's Question Time in February 2001, and the statistic has been cited in his subsequent press releases.

Burstow is campaigning for changes to the existing laws regarding paedophilia and the internet. Tony Blair has confirmed that he will consider such changes (2), and home secretary Jack Straw has agreed to meet with Burstow at the Home Office later in March 2001 'to help develop an action plan to make the UK the safest place in the world for children to use the internet' (3).

This 'one in five' statistic is enough to terrify any parent. But can internet chat rooms really pose a danger to children on such a scale? Given that an estimated 4.8million children in the UK now use the internet, this would mean that potentially hundreds of thousands of them are at risk from paedophiles in chat rooms.

In investigating the evidence behind this statistic, I ran into considerable difficulty. Burstow's press office did not know the origins of the statistic, and claimed that the figure had been passed to them by the internet safety agency Childnet International (4). Childnet's administrator Ellen Rogers told me that I would have to wait for the appropriate person to call me back with the necessary information.

Given that this frightening 'one in five' statistic has been so widely used, wouldn't you expect those who base their press releases on it to have more of an idea about what research it is based on?

In fact, as Childnet's development manager Stephen Carrick-Davies later clarified, 'That statistic has been blown out of all proportion'. He was supportive of new government initiatives to make internet chat rooms safer, but he balked at the uses to which the 'one in five' statistic was being put. 'There are real dangers out there', he said, 'but any message about the internet must emphasise the positive as well as the negative'.

Carrick-Davies explained that the 'one in five' figure originally came from a June 2000 report on American children conducted for congress by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) (5). Looking at the original NCMEC report (6), it is striking how much the meaning of the statistic has been twisted by the recent campaigns.

The NCMEC's national survey of 1501 American 10- to 17-year-olds found that 'approximately one in five received a sexual solicitation or approach over the internet in the last year' (7). There is a huge leap from 'sexual solicitation or approach' to Paul Burstow's phrase, 'approached by a paedophile'.

The report found that almost half of the solicitations reported did not come from an adult, but from other children: 'juveniles made 48 percent of the overall and 48 percent of the aggressive solicitations.' (9) The report also points out that only 'one quarter of young people who reported these incidents were distressed by them' (8). 'Sexual solicitations' between children in an internet chat room are the online equivalent of adolescent fumbling, a world away from the threat of paedophilia.

Despite this less threatening reality, Burstow's inaccurate and emotive use of the 'one in five' statistic has provoked the UK prime minister and the home secretary to consider new legislation around this issue.

Concern around paedophiles' use of chat rooms soared in mid-March with two government publications on the subject: a set of Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) guidelines (10) written by Childnet, and a Home Office report (11) written by the Internet Crime Forum (12). The Home Office report, *Chat Wise, Street Wise: Children and Internet Chat Services*, recommends supervising children while they surf, anonymising children's email addresses, using software to filter internet content accessed by children, advising children not to open suspect email attachments, and countless other safety measures.

Children are, and should be, supervised to some extent when they are online. But how necessary are the measures proposed here?

I hoped that *Chat Wise, Street Wise* would have more a factual basis to its recommendations than the ill-used 'one in five' statistic. Unfortunately not. The report devotes only 22 of its 183 paragraphs to quantifying the risk to children in internet chat rooms - the remainder consists of descriptions of the danger and of measures to counter it.

The authors confess that 'it is extremely difficult to make any accurate assessment of the level of sexual approaches to children in chat rooms in the UK'. They list eight instances where a UK adult with suspect intentions contacted a minor in an internet chat room and engineered a meeting offline. Of these eight cases, four resulted in the adult being convicted of a crime.

The report argues that even those cases that did not result in a criminal conviction are significant: 'Whilst no criminal investigations resulted from these incidents...they did heighten awareness of chat room issues.' It seems that, faced with only four criminal cases to give evidence of the dangers posed to UK children in chat rooms, the report tries to make out that there is a sinister unknown quantity hidden behind the figures. It complains, for example, that 'reports of incidents which do not lead to criminal charges are not recorded'. But anybody can be suspected of enticing children online - finding them guilty is quite another matter.

An unknown quantity is not sinister; it is simply unknown, and therefore statistically meaningless. Parents and teachers do not deserve to be scared out of their wits by erroneous claims that 'one in five children who use internet chat rooms are approached by paedophiles'; and new laws do not need to be drafted on the back of half-baked statistics with no basis in fact.

Sandy Starr has consulted and written on internet regulation for the [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#), and for the European Commission research project [RightsWatch](#). He is a contributor to *Spreading the Word on the Internet: Sixteen Answers to Four Questions*, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003 ([download this book \(.pdf 576 KB\)](#)); *From Quill to Cursor: Freedom of the Media in the Digital Era*, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2003 ([download this book \(.pdf 399 KB\)](#)); and *The Internet: Brave New World?*, Hodder Murray, 2002 (buy this book from [Amazon \(UK\)](#) or [Amazon \(USA\)](#)).

Read on:

[Back to the asylum](#), by Jennie Bristow

[TV as judge and executioner](#), by James Heartfield

(1) [House of Commons debates](#), Paul Burstow, *Hansard*, 28 February 2001, col 904

(2) [Guardian](#), 28 February 2001

(3) Jack Straw, letter to Paul Burstow, 19 March 2001

(4) See the [Childnet International](#) website

(5) See the [National Centre For Missing and Exploited Children](#) website

(6) *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, June 2000. Click [here](#) to download a copy of the report in .pdf format

(7) *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, p9

(8) *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, p9

(9) *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, p16

(10) See the [Guardian](#), 22 March 2001

(11) *Chat Wise, Street Wise: Children and Internet Chat Services* can be found [here](#)

(12) See the [Internet Crime Forum](#) website



Reprinted from : <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000000553F.htm>

[spiked sections](#) | [central](#) | [culture](#) | [essays](#) | [health](#) | [life](#) | [liberties](#) | [politics](#) | [risk](#) | [science](#) | [IT](#)

spiked, Signet House, 49-51 Farringdon Road, London, EC1M 3JP

Email: info@spiked-online.com © spiked 2000-2003 All rights reserved.

spiked is not responsible for the content of any third-party websites.

Powered by  **x-port**