

**2013 Herman Goldstein Award for Excellence
Loudoun County Sheriff's Office, Virginia
Internet Safety: What Parents Need to Know**

Summary

Loudoun County has the unique designation of being one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. While this distinction may seem like a fiscal blessing, it comes with unique problems and crime that are facilitated by Loudoun's youth having ready access to technology and the internet. Loudoun County's unique problem focused on the fact that many, if not most of the youth own either smart phones, tablet devices, or laptops. In most cases Loudoun's youth have daily access to all three. This unlimited access to the internet also provided unlimited access to all of the dangers associated with technology addiction, cyber bullying, and child predatory behavior.

The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office began the Scan phase by engaging with public school administrators, school counselors, School Resource Deputies, and DARE Deputies to determine the depth of the problem and whether there were indications of a widespread problems revolving around the access to this technology. The resounding answer was "yes" and since each group had a unique perspective on the issue, an across the board perspective of the depth of the problem was obtained.

In the Analysis phase, the information from each contributing group was examined to determine the ties it had to technology and the internet. This process identified that this was not a new problem and since there was a lack of parental knowledge, much of the victimization went unreported. This lack of reporting further precipitated the issue because the youth using the technology began to accept this victimization as a normal rite of passage when it came to using technology.

The Sheriff's Office Response was to develop a team of Internet Safety Educators, each having a unique background in technology.

This team developed and designed the **Internet Safety: What Parents Need to Know** curriculum which was presented to parents, care givers, counselors, and school administrators, across the county.

The Assessment of the first year of this program has been positive. Accolades received from parents and administrators have been overwhelming. For many parents, this was their first real look at the darker side of technology and the internet. Furthermore, our Internet Crime Against Children (ICAC) cases increased from only 9 cases in all of 2012 to 19 cases in just the first quarter of 2013; which is a clear indication that parents were taking their new found knowledge and beginning a real dialogue with their children.

Initiative Overview

Scan

Loudoun County has the dubious distinction of being considered one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. Loudoun County is the corporate home to AOL, Orbital, Verizon, LiveWire, Raytheon, to name just a few, as well as home to Dulles International Airport. Loudoun County is also considered a bedroom community for the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Region being just a short 30 minute drive from Washington D.C. As such, many of Loudoun's citizens work with and in many cases design, build, or write programs associated with some of today's most advanced technology. This prevalence toward technology puts Loudoun's youth in a unique and dangerous situation. Many of Loudoun's youth have smart phones by the time they are starting the 6th grade and their use and knowledge of technology in many cases exceeds even that of their technology savvy parents. Coupled with Loudoun's low crime rate, Loudoun's youth believed that internet predatory behavior is something that happens in other places, not in Loudoun. It was this lack of concern and caution that made the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office begin to question if we were somehow not hearing about the internet predatory incidents that had to be taking place in Loudoun County. With such a proliferation of technology in the hands of Loudoun's youth is it possible that the youth were somehow not being targeted or victimized?

Through the close working relationship the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office has with our public schools and by engaging the School Resource Deputies and DARE Deputies the findings began to paint a picture that showed the victimization of Loudoun's youth through technology was indeed very common. These cases varied from simple Sexting incidents to an abduction case and even the suicide of a student that had technology related connections.

Some of these cases were up to five years old and many had never been reported. This lack of reporting caused a number of concerns.

- Why were the cases not being reported?
- Were parents aware that these incidents were taking place and were illegal?
- If parents did not know, was the child still in danger of being repeatedly victimized?
- Did the youth know that what was happening to them was illegal?
- Why did the youth not feel threatened by these incidents or behaviors?
- Did parents lack the knowledge to know when they should report an incident?
- Was there a disconnect between our youth and their parents when it came to technology?
- If so, how do we bridge that gap between parents and their children?

Analyze

The initial identification of this problem was alarming and it was very quickly realized that regular and routine victimization of youth had been taking place, yet no one was reporting it. In speaking with youth in the schools and other outlets, many considered these acts a rite of passage to the world of technology. The act of having someone send you a pornographic image or asking for a nude picture was viewed as common place and did not alarm many of Loudoun's youth. This desensitization to online predatory behaviors was alarming and put Loudoun's youth at great risk, especially with the proliferation of technology in the hands of the youth.

While investigating the factors leading up to this conclusion it was also determined that many of Loudoun's youth were outpacing their technology savvy parents when it came to using everyday technology. Many parents admitted to feeling overwhelmed and not knowing where to seek out the latest information or where to find out about the latest trends. The disconnect between youth and their

parents, when it came to technology, was a key trait that was facilitating the victimization of youth in Loudoun County and was directly related to the absence in reporting.

Youth did not feel they could have a conversation with their parents and parents were apprehensive to let their children know that they did not understand current technology or trends.

To look at possible solutions to these trends, the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office pulled together a group of subject matter experts in the field of technology and internet use. This group was pulled from our own rank and file after identifying those with unique backgrounds. These deputies included those with experience in software development, gaming design and testing, internet crime investigation, crime prevention and program/initiative development, and community oriented policing. This group of deputies assumed the role of the agency's Internet Safety Program Team.

It was this team that identified what was considered the key factor in the disconnect between youth and the hazards of technology, the parents. The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office regularly teaches youth about internet safety through such programs as DARE and through agency sponsored summer camps. Loudoun County Sheriff's Office also teaches classes through boy scouts and girl scouts, civic groups, religious organizations, and the county library system. The Internet Safety Program Team quickly realized that while we spend a few short hours with these children, it is parents who are truly the gatekeepers when it comes to monitoring their child's day to day activity.

The Internet Safety Program Team found that the internet is littered with multiple programs designed to help youth understand and safely use the internet, but there were few up to date programs for parents. Even those that were written and designed for parental education were found to be using dated information that had not evolved or changed and most were not being updated to reflect the latest trends and programs in use by youth. It was this key factor that led to the writing of the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office initiative, **Internet Safety: What Parents Need to Know**.

Response

Once it was identified that the lack of parental knowledge was a key factor, The Internet Safety Program Team began to develop a mechanism to reach out to parents. The initiative became known as **Internet Safety: What Parents Need to Know**. This initiative was presented to the public school administration and with their input and approval we began to plan the outreach and education components of this initiative.

The Internet Safety Program Team began the development of a curriculum that would later be presented to more than 2,500 parents during 12 school based sessions throughout Loudoun County. This curriculum was specifically written to give parents a real life look at internet safety and to take off the rose colored glasses that many parents had been viewing internet safety through. As the curriculum was developed it became apparent that this class could not be one of those “shoot from the hip” one hour classes typical of public safety outreach. It was decided that the curriculum would be broken into two separate 1.5 hour classes, each addressing a specific sub category of technology and internet safety. Some of the subjects covered in these classes included Internet Predatory Behavior and Techniques, Online Gaming Hazards, Social Networking, Internet Pornography, Sexting and Texting, Technology Trends, Access Control Techniques for Parents, Technology Addiction Warning Signs, Parental Monitoring, Internet and Browser Hazards, Video Chatting, Geotagging, Digital Picture Safety and Awareness, and Local and National Case Studies. This class was also written using the most recent research and information available on Internet Safety and Child Victimization. In light of the initiative’s unique audience, the Internet Safety Program Team used the latest information about current technology trends that would be easily recognized by Loudoun’s technology savvy parents and lend credibility and accuracy to our presentation.

The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office would make this curriculum available to parents through the public schools. By partnering with the school administration the agency was able to utilize the schools cluster system to establish a class schedule. Each class would be held at one of the 13 high schools, and the invitations to attend the class would be sent out from the principals of the middle and elementary schools that feed into that high school. By using this mechanism to invite parents to attend the class, there would be an increase in the diversity of those in attendance at each class while still being fiscally responsible and minimizing the man hours necessary to reach parents from every school in Loudoun County.

The last component that was needed was a way to make the danger real to parents so they would take it seriously and begin the dialogue necessary to keep their children safe. This last component was found in a Loudoun County citizen. This parent advocate, whose 13 year old daughter was abducted off their neighborhood street, brutally raped and beaten for 5 hours, and then thrown from a truck and left on the roadside for dead by a person she had meet through the internet, became the voice of reality for our parents. Even though the incident took place in an adjoining jurisdiction before the family moved to Loudoun County, the power of the story and to hear the words of warning from a fellow parent made our message real and for the first time, for many parents, they felt their children may be in real danger. For the first time, it wasn't something that happened in another city or state, it was something that happened close to home—something that could happen in Loudoun County.

Knowing that The Internet Safety Program Team now had parent's attention and had equipped them with a wealth of knowledge and insight to share with their children, parents now needed tangible resources. The Internet Safety Program Team developed a brochure that highlighted many of the key points for the two part presentation. It provided parent's reminders for "must talk about" subjects to cover with their children. This brochure became the parents cheat sheet for that meaningful dialog they would have with their child after attending the class.

The second takeaway that was provided to parents was a free copy of our “ComputerCop” software. This software, in disc form, provided parents with an easy to use software that would forensically scan any computer searching for such things as saved pictures, videos, and emails. It also could scan for other data such as websites the computer had visited, and even maintain a “key logger” file for any messages, texts, posts, or comments sent from the computer. All of this capability without having to download any program or software onto the computer, it runs straight from the disc. Additional benefits to this type of software were that a single disc could be used on an infinite number of computers and all at no cost to the tax payer since the program was purchased with seized asset forfeiture funds.

Assessment

It was amazing how many technology savvy parents knew nothing about the dangers associated with technology and the internet. While many parents rose their hand in response to our opening question “Who here feels like their kids know more about technology than they do?” many did not know the true depth of the danger and how technology is being utilized to put their children in danger. For most parents, the 1.5 hour class was spent sitting on the edge of their seat feverishly scribbling notes for the dialogue they would begin with their children after the class. At nearly every class our Internet Safety Program Team would spend another hour or more after the class answering specific question, giving advice, and even giving parents hands on demonstrations of what was discussed in the class. As this was a two part class, nearly every second session contained more people than the preceding session. This occurred because parents went home and then dragged a neighbor or friend back with them to hear our message and to learn.

The Internet Safety: What Parents Need to Know initiative quickly took on a life of it's own. Above and beyond the classes at the public schools, Loudoun County Sheriff's Office was receiving requests from churches, civic groups, and businesses, to name a few.

After a series of national news articles and television coverage on the initiative, the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office began to get invitations from communities in other jurisdictions and even other states. Agencies from Virginia as well as from other states began to contact us and wanted to model the "in your face" approach to making parents take a cold hard look at what is actually going on when it comes to technology. This became a challenge as every member of the Internet Safety Program Team had other primary duties within the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office. In some cases there just was not enough time to get to every request and/or invitation. The agency began to invite parents from other jurisdictions to come to Loudoun to attend the presentation and they did, some driving more than two hours one way just to attend the class. We even had law enforcement administrators from other jurisdictions in attendance to see what Loudoun County Sheriff's Office was doing different that made this program effective where theirs were failing.

Oftentimes it can be difficult to quantify a preventative initiative. How do you show the absence of something when it was absent before the initiative? In our case, we did not experience a post-initiative absence or decline, but rather a post initiative increase. In all of 2012, the agencies Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) investigators worked 9 cases. In 2013, Loudoun County Sheriff's Office ICAC investigators opened 19 ICAC cases from January to March, and the number of cases continues to increase. One of those cases came from a middle school student who came to her mother after she felt awkward about a comment that was made by another middle school student at her school via Skype. (It was later determined that the person making the comments was an adult male posing as a student.) This dialog between a mother and a daughter led to an investigation that identified 73 other victims in Loudoun County alone. This investigation led to the arrest of a contract Department of Homeland

Security employee who had been trying to lure female middle school students into meeting him in “real life.” This person was living less than 2 miles from the school where he was posing as a student.

Since Loudoun County Sheriff’s Office began this initiative, the agency has received letters, emails, and voicemails from many parents thanking the Internet Safety Program Team for the taking the time to share their knowledge with them. For many parents this class was all they needed to begin a meaningful dialog with their child. The attending parents had learned enough to begin a real conversation with their children, using terms their children recognized. For the first time, for many parents, they connected with their children about technology.

As the school year draws to a close and recently the last class through the public schools was completed, the Internet Safety Program Team is already planning for next year. This summer the Internet Safety Program Team will tear the current presentation down and rewrite it with the latest information, facts, figures, and trends. This will be an annual task of the Internet Safety Program Team. This will ensure that what is being shared with parents, care givers, teachers, counselors, and school administrators is the best and most up to date product that can possibly be presented to prepare them for that meaningful dialog with the youth of Loudoun County.

Agency Contact:

Sheriff Mike Chapman
Mike.Chapman@loudoun.gov
703-777-0407

Project Team Members:

Major John Fraga
Deputy First Class James Spurlock Jr.
Deputy First Class Andrew Johnson
Deputy Specialist Jason Fedkiw