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'Monitoring' the Sex Offender

The personal computer and the Internet—rarities in the home just a decade or so ago—are now commonplace, even pervasive. They are how many of us get news, check the weather, shop, and communicate. A few clicks can put vast amounts of information, research, and services within quick, easy reach. But despite all the benefits the Internet brings, this speed and easy access can also result in major problems. Hackers break into systems and clog e-mail inboxes with spam or access financial accounts. Would-be terrorists use search engines to download information on explosives and chemical agents. And sex offenders search for pornography sites—or their next victim.

For already overburdened probation and parole officers, the advent of the personal computer and the Internet has further complicated their caseloads. But a course titled, "Managing Sex Offenders' Computer Use: A 2-Day Technical Training for Probation and Parole Officers," offers them the knowledge and tools needed to manage these difficult cases. The course, which began under the auspices of the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) in 2003, is now being offered through the National Institute of Justice's National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)—Rocky Mountain in Denver, Colorado.

"Computer use by convicted sex offenders is a new and significant challenge to probation and parole folks," says Joe Russo, program manager for corrections at NLECTC—Rocky Mountain. "They are used to dealing with cases on a personal level, trying to understand and deal with all of the traditional factors that lead to criminal behavior. Most were already stretched too thin trying to manage their caseloads. The Internet, because of its potential dangers, adds a sizable dimension of risk for officers to manage."

Probation and parole officers are up against overwhelming odds because across the United States, 60 to 70 percent of individuals convicted of sex offenses every year are sentenced to probation and supervised in the community, according to course instructor Dr. Jim Tanner. "Moreover, many times the offenders are more computer literate than the officers attempting to supervise

their computer use," Tanner says. "These are very complex cases. Most experts on sex offenders support the theory that there is no known cure for this behavior. Effective programs try to manage offenders by providing treatment to help them identify thinking errors, recognize risk factors in their environment, and develop skills which help control their deviant impulses. Management of an offender's computer use is an important aspect of this containment."

Although sex offenders can abuse Internet access, courts generally do not restrict access. According to Russo, court rulings say Internet use is so broadly ingrained in today's society that restricting access would be like barring individuals from all telephone use because they used the telephone to commit fraud. Instead, probation and parole agencies must request access to offenders' computers as a special condition at the time of sentencing or early in the supervision process. "It's a very scary situation in terms of the potential risk, but this course gives the officers the resources they need to deal with it and manage it," Russo says.

The course, originally developed by APPA working with a consultant, was offered several times during 2003 in Golden, Colorado, but many agencies did not have the travel budget to send people to Colorado for the training. At the same time, NLECTC—Rocky Mountain was exploring the best ways to provide technical assistance in this important area and recognized that the biggest impact it could have was to "take the training to the field, instead of having the field come to the training and to do so at no cost to the practitioners," Russo says. So in 2004 the Rocky Mountain Center began offering the course throughout its 10-State region.

In addition to working with APPA and its consultant, NLECTC—Rocky Mountain also collaborated with individual States, identifying the key community corrections agencies in those States, then working with those agencies to identify suitable computer labs for the training and appropriate participants to take the course.

“We didn’t want this to be a self-selecting thing,” Russo explains. “We didn’t want someone who is interested, but is not actively supervising sex offenders, to take a seat away from someone who really needs it. Rather, participants can take the information and resource disk back to their workplaces and share the knowledge with their coworkers.”

To run the hands-on course, the instructor needs a 30- to 40-seat computer lab for 2 days, temporarily installing hard drives that contain actual caches of information from sex offenders’ computers. (Although the course includes sexually explicit materials, it does not include child pornography.) Topics covered in “Managing Sex Offenders’ Computer Use” include—

- Understanding sex offenders and the effects of pornography.
- How sex offenders access information.
- Ways in which computers can be involved in crimes.
- Legal issues.
- Technical aspects of computer management.
- Installing appropriate software and selecting text search keywords.
- Examining and cleaning hard drives.

The course teaches probation and parole officers to take a different approach to computer forensics than the one traditionally followed by law enforcement, Russo says. Law enforcement looks at a hard drive as a historical record of evidence used in the prosecution of a crime that has already occurred. Probation and parole officers have a different orientation; they are more concerned with managing and monitoring behavior from this point forward to try to prevent future crime.

“Often during a counseling session,” Russo says, “what a sex offender says is his main sexual interest is not really his main interest. By checking his hard drive, we can find out what he’s really been looking at. This can become a baseline for helping him get the right treatment.” After learning as much as possible about the offender, the officer then wipes the hard drive clean and installs monitoring software so that periodic checks of the hard drive will indicate if the offender has violated his supervision or even committed a new crime.

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“Offenders will of course try to beat the software,” he adds. The course instructs officers to equate the computer check to a drug test: offenders may beat a particular test, but anyone who is still a user will eventually get caught. The same principle applies to sex offenders: they might get around monitoring a couple of times, but not forever. The unanimously positive feedback received by the Rocky Mountain Center proves that probation and parole officers need this training to teach them the skills that will ensure violators eventually are caught.

“Officers usually are shocked at the extent of pornography available on the Internet,” Russo says. “The depth and breadth of perversity and the dangers the Internet poses for sex offenders is a slap in the face to them. Officers are used to dealing with offenders’ addictions, joblessness, and family relationships; now they must also deal with online pornography, sex chat rooms and discussion boards, and dating services that target vulnerable, single-mom families with the ‘right type’ of children in the household.

“After they get over the initial shock,” he says, “then we tell them here are some real tools and a concrete way to manage the situation, to find out what sex offenders might be up to. People say this is a great training because it is timely, it addresses a critical need, and it is geared specifically to community corrections. Participants also appreciate that the training is problem/solution based. The instructor does a great job of explaining the dangers of the Internet in the hands of the sex offender and then provides the means to help manage that risk.”

For more information on “Managing Sex Offenders’ Computer Use: A 2-Day Technical Training for Probation and Parole Officers,” contact Joe Russo at NLECTC-Rocky Mountain, 800-416-8086 or jrusso@du.edu.



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