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Understanding the Dark Side of Social Media

Social media can play a tragic and life-changing role in sexual violence. Whether it involves teenagers sharing nude photos of a classmate, posting sexual accusations or gossip online, texting threats to an ex-girlfriend, or recording sexual assault incidents and distributing them electronically—each of these cases are very real and has lasting consequences.

Crime Prevention Ottawa (CPO), in partnership with the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW), released a research report into this complex issue. The report is titled *Sexual Violence, Social Media and Youth*. It examines the impact of social media on youth in sexual violence situations. Conducted by Jordan Fairbairn (PhD candidate), Dr. Rena Bivens and Dr. Myrna Dawson, it takes a community-based approach to examining the problem and its impact on victims and survivors.

The researchers found that:

- Little is known about the sexual nature of online abuse and harassment.
- A majority of sexual violence associated with social media goes unreported.
- Abusive relationship patterns may be facilitated or maintained through social media.
- Young women and girls appear to experience higher rates of sexual violence associated with social media.

They also identified the following priorities for the prevention of sexual violence associated with social media:

- We need to understand what is unique about social media while recognizing that it does not cause sexual violence.
- We must support and build media literacy among children, teenagers and their parents.
- We need to encourage youth and parents to define and develop healthy relationships in social media contexts.
- We should draw from programs that educate and engage bystanders to prevent sexual violence.
- We need to develop youth-driven programming that recognizes the different ways in which young people use and experience social media.

CPO and OCTEVAW consulted with the community following the report's release. Together with participants, they identified prevention tools and next steps to help Ottawa to deal with the problem. The presentation and interviews with participants are available on YouTube at www.youtube.com/crimepottawavideos. The final report is also online at www.crimepreventionottawa.ca.