

House votes bill attacking sex crime against children

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House yesterday unanimously passed a bill to crack down on sexual crimes against young children, particularly where the Internet plays a role.

The measure, which passed 416-0, would create a series of child-sex offenses and increase existing penalties for adults who seek and engage in sexual activity with children.

The Clinton administration said it supports the bill, which advanced to the Senate.

Rep. Bill McCollum, R-Fla., the sponsor, said use of the Internet by more than 10 million children has contributed to a "chilling mix" that has resulted in "far too many terrible tragedies that steal innocence from our children and create scars for life."

Other sponsors said that children who seemingly are safe in their living rooms, bedrooms and classrooms too often become victims of sexual predators who view the Internet as a new window through which they can terrorize children anonymously.

"The technology of computers and the Internet have gotten ahead of the law," said Rep. Tony Hall, D-Ohio. "This bill is an attempt to catch up."

Rep. Jennifer Dunn, R-Wash., another co-sponsor, said the measure "tells cyber-predators that the information superhighway is not a detour for deviant behavior, but rather a dead end."

During committee hearings, an Illinois woman told how her family's life was disrupted after someone included her 9-year-old daughter's name, home telephone number and other information in an Internet message stating that she was interested in having sex with adult men.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Establishes fines and up to five years in prison for anyone using the mail, the Internet or other means to contact a minor for criminal sexual activity or to send children obscene material.
- Creates a minimum sentence of three years in prison for using a computer to coerce or entice a minor to engage in illegal sex acts.
- Requires Internet service providers to report knowledge of child abuse or exploitation.
- Creates a new offense, punishable by a fine or up to five years in prison, for knowingly transmitting, printing, publishing or reproducing the name, address, telephone number, e-mail address or other identifying information about a minor for illegal sex acts.
- Doubles to 10 years in prison the penalty for enticing a minor to cross state lines to engage in illegal sex acts.
- Prohibits unsupervised access to the Internet by federal prisoners.
- Makes possession of child pornography illegal. Current law allows individuals to possess up to two items without violating the law.
- Doubles prison sentences for abusive sexual contact with victims under age 12.