

## Connected and Concerned: Variation in Parents' Online Safety Concerns

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*The widespread adoption of social media and other networked technologies by youth has prompted concerns about the safety issues they face when they go online, including the potential of being hurt by a stranger, being exposed to pornographic or violent content, and bullying or being bullied. These concerns often manifest as fears and anxieties in parents and can lead to pervasive moral panics. Eager to shield children from potential risks, parents—and lawmakers—often respond to online safety concerns by enacting restrictions with little consideration for the discrepancy between parental concern and actual harm. As this article shows, parental fears are not uniform across different population groups. Our findings demonstrate that, while concern may be correlated with experiencing online safety risks, parental concerns with respect to online safety issues also vary significantly by background—notably race and ethnicity, income, metropolitan status, and political ideology. As policies develop to empower parents, more consideration must be given to how differences in parental fears shape attitudes, practices, and norms.*

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**KEY WORDS:** online safety, fear, parenting, social media

### Introduction

Parental fear is widely debated; “anxious parents” and “paranoid parenting” are seen as a common part of the contemporary familial landscape (Furedi, 2002; Nelson, 2010; Stearns, 2003). When it comes to youth, fear often takes two seemingly contradictory turns. Adults are afraid *for* and afraid *of* youth. On the one hand, adults worry about all of the dreadful things to which youth might be exposed and all of the harm they might face (e.g., pornography, sexual predators). On the other hand, adults fear uncontrollable youth who might do terrible things, get into trouble, and hurt others (e.g., deviance, bullies).

These dichotomous fears have long played a central role in discussions about what youth should and should not be allowed to do (Valentine, 2004). Over the last 30 years, youth have been evicted from public spaces like playgrounds, parks, and malls, often because of these dichotomous fears. One of the reasons that young people have turned to the Internet is to reclaim a public space where they can gather with friends, hang out, and have fun (boyd, 2007). Yet, adults have

also raised concerns about youth participation in these networked publics (Clark, 2012; Finkelhor, 2011; Livingstone, 2009; Ponte & Simões, 2009). Many of the concerns parallel offline concerns. For example, fear of victimization by sexual predators is the most salient concern offline (Pain, 2006), and this has also been a core fear regarding young people's interactions online (Marwick, 2008). Likewise, concerns surrounding bullying and exposure to problematic content like pornography and violent media have been persistent issues, both online and off (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Palfrey, boyd, & Sacco, 2010). What parents worry about and fear is important to understand because such concerns drive so much of public discourse, including efforts to limit children's activities (Nelson, 2010).

Parental fears are often shaped by parental concerns, which typically stem from parents' desire to shield their children from risk. In order to reduce the risks that their children face, parents often employ a variety of strategies, including placing restrictions on their children's behavior, getting more involved in their children's lives, or trying to educate their children about risks (e.g., Byrne & Lee, 2011). Generally speaking, parents are encouraged to take measures to protect their children from risks; proactively engaged parents are seen as "good" parents. But people are notoriously bad at assessing risk (Glassner, 2000), especially in a new environment where they have little experience. While not all concerns turn into fears, it is likely that widespread concerns—and especially those that involve new environments—are more likely to manifest as fears. Such is often the case with children's online behavior.

When parents are afraid, they often turn to restrictions in an effort to control the situation and limit access to potential dangers. Policymakers often employ restrictions as a potential solution to widespread concerns. Such restrictions may have a beneficial or neutral impact on their children's lives, or they may limit crucial coming-of-age outcomes, including learning, social development, and opportunities to engage in public life (Livingstone, 2009).

While parental fears generally, and with respect to technology specifically, are widely discussed, little is known about how widespread concerns are among parents from different backgrounds. It may well be that some parents worry more about certain issues than others. And perhaps certain types of parents are more worried overall than other types. Given the degree to which parental concerns shape public discourse and policymaking regarding youth practices, it is important to understand the topology of concerns among parents of different backgrounds. If public policy is intended to empower parents, understanding differences between parents is important for the development of policy initiatives.

## **Background**

### *A Brief History of Parental Concerns*

The notion of childhood has changed tremendously throughout history (Hine, 1999; Postman, 1994). Until the Victorian era, contemporary concepts like

"child abuse" and "child labor" held no cultural significance. This all shifted in the twentieth century, as concern over children's well-being became commonplace. Laws were introduced to ban child labor, and organizations like the "Children's Bureau" (a.k.a., "Child Protective Services") were established. As society began recognizing childhood, the public became simultaneously focused on the ways in which children were vulnerable and needed protection, and also the ways in which children were deviants who needed to be controlled (Postman, 1994; Zelizer, 1995).

The latter strand of thinking gave rise to the notion of "juvenile delinquency." By the 1950s, concerns about delinquent youth were widespread. More often than not, parents believed that other people's children were more dangerous than their own and that children from other racial, ethnic, or class backgrounds were particularly worrisome (Feld, 1999). The problematic "delinquent" was regularly depicted in popular media, such as in the book *"The Outsiders"* or the musical *"Grease."* Sociologists and psychologists began investigating juvenile delinquency, focusing on individual risk factors, familial factors, and correlations with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Siegel & Welsh, 2011). Prevention became a significant focus. Cities began implementing curfews and banning young people from loitering or gathering in public places (Valentine, 2004). As a result, teenagers' access to public spaces declined (Bird, 2007). Today, the idea of an 8-year-old freely roaming the streets is unimaginable in many communities in the United States, which is in great contrast to norms of decades past.

Amidst conversations about delinquency, many parents worried about negative influences. They feared that their "good" children would be turned "bad" because of peer pressure or exposure to deviance. These concerns emerged at a time when public policy efforts were focused on racial integration of schools; race and class underpinned the cultural conversation about delinquency (Feld, 1999). In addition to the "rotten apple theory"—the notion that one "bad" child would negatively influence the cohort—additional concerns emerged that puberty renders teenagers incapable of making rational decisions (Bradley, 2003; Strauch, 2003). Although both the notion of teenagers and the idea of adolescence are social constructs that emerged in the twentieth century (Hine, 1999; Lesko, 2001), this age group has since been assumed to be especially vulnerable to external influences. As new genres of media were developed, so too did concerns. By the mid-1950s, psychologist Frederic Wertham (1954) was warning society about the dangers of comic books in his manuscript, *"Seduction of the Innocent."* Meanwhile, the rise of rock "n" roll—and Elvis's hips—worried many.

Given the pervasiveness of contemporary parental fears, scholars have begun arguing that the "risk society" (Beck, 1992) has brought about "anxious parenting" and "paranoid parenting" (Furedi, 2002; Nelson, 2010; Stearns, 2003). These scholars focus on the ways in which fear is disconnected from experiences or actual risk. The idea is that children are constructed as vulnerable, innocent, and "at risk" and that parents—as children's protectors—must be vigilant in order to protect their children from a constant state of danger (Pain, 2006; Scott, Jackson, & Backet-Milburn, 1998; Valentine, 2004). Furedi (2002) places the blame

on the rise of the “child protection industry,” highlighting the ways in which parenting experts use the media to give relentless advice while simultaneously positioning parents as inadequate and incompetent.

While these scholars—and advocates who hold similar positions (Skenazy, 2009) point to the pervasiveness of fear as a reason to reconsider how parenting operates, critics are quick to highlight that focusing on the rationality—or irrationality—of fear misses the point (Pain, 2006). First, some youth are actually at risk. Second, even when it is statistically uncommon for something terrible to happen, it is reasonable for parents to want to take every step possible to prevent bad things from happening to their children. Parental concern is not in and of itself a problem, but when fears are embraced differently in different communities, increased over time, or magnified by external forces, it is important to interrogate the reasons.

Young people’s experiences are shaped in part by parental concerns and fears, especially when adults seek to protect teens by heavily restricting what it is they can do and learn. As a result, as Stanley Cohen (1972, p. 151) notes, “The young are consigned to a self-contained world with their own preoccupations, their entrance into adult status is frustrated, and they are rewarded for dependency.” In contemporary society, young people are socially isolated for their safety and to protect others from them. Fear is likely at the root of these restrictions.

### *Regulation of Online Safety Issues*

Fears and anxieties regarding young people are not new, but new technologies create new sites of concern. The rise of the Internet and social media have reinforced and magnified existing fears while also creating a new target to blame: technology. Since the rise of the Internet, we have seen a wide variety of concerns regarding young people’s technological engagement, including privacy, pornography, hacking, cyberbullying, sexting, addiction, sexual victimization, identity theft, self-harm content, file sharing, and violent content (boyd, Ryan, & Leavitt, 2011; Jenkins, 1998; Lane, 2011; Lumby & Fine, 2006). Some of these are unique to the Internet, but many are either an extension or reformulation of offline concerns. When they manifest as fears, these concerns tend to fall into three clusters: concern about contact or fear of physical harm (e.g., sexual victimization), concern about content or fear of psychological harm (e.g., exposure to pornography or violent material), and concern about conduct or fear of illicit activities in which youth might engage (e.g., illegal file-sharing). The first two categories tend to get lumped together under the concept of “online safety,” although some aspects of the third do as well.

Scholars have been examining different aspects of online safety issues for well over a decade. A review of the literature shows that while youth can and do get into trouble online, offline settings are often still more risky for most youth (Schrock & boyd, 2011). Even the most pervasive concern—that of online sexual predators—turns out to be mythical; children are at much greater risk of sexual

harm at the hands of people they know. When children are harmed online, the dynamics are not what people imagine them to be (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). Bullying is equally complicated; it turns out that, even with the rise of the Internet, bullying is more likely to occur at school and youth report greater emotional duress as a result of unmediated encounters (Levy et al., 2012). While technology primarily extends existing safety concerns, the Internet also makes many risky behaviors and problematic activities more visible (boyd & Marwick, 2009), which simultaneously creates new opportunities to intervene and magnifies concerns regarding technology.

Although understudied, earlier work has also looked at the fears and concerns parents have regarding online safety issues. In a study of 27 European countries, scholars found that parents are more concerned about contact and content risks than conduct-related ones (Ponte & Simões, 2009). They found that both parental experience with technology and the child's age are significant factors in explaining variation in parental fears. In a Greek study, scholars found that negative parental attitudes toward the Internet tended to increase negative perceptions parents had toward their children's online activities (Floros, Siomos, Dafouli, Fisoun, & Geroukalis, 2012).

Building off of work on "moral panics" (Ben-Yehuda & Goode, 1994), Marwick (2008) highlights that "technopanics" tend to pathologize young people's use of new media forms in ways that prompt people to believe that regulating the technology will address the relevant fear. In describing the implications of technopanics surrounding social media, Marwick points to Springhall's work to highlight the cyclical nature of heightened public concerns being used to regulate what is new:

Whenever the introduction of a new mass medium is defined as a threat to the young, we can expect a campaign by adults to regulate, ban or censor, followed by a lessening of interest until the appearance of a new medium reopens public debate. Each new panic develops as if it were the first time such issues have been debated in public and yet the debates are strikingly similar (Springhall, 1998, p. 7).

Fears of online safety-related issues have prompted a wave of media stories and regulatory efforts. In 1998, the U.S. Congress passed two pieces of legislation meant to address problems that were perceived to be caused by the Internet: (1) the "Children's Online Protection Act (COPA)"—a law intended to limit minors' access to harmful content, an act that was deemed unconstitutional (Hindman, 2010); and (2) the "Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)"—a law intended to empower parents and protect children's privacy, which is still in place today (boyd, Hargittai, Schultz, & Palfrey, 2011). Since then, numerous legislative efforts have been made to address a wide array of online safety concerns, including bills meant to address sexual predators, cyberbullying, and sexting. In addition, a cottage industry of online safety professionals has emerged to build technologies, develop educational materials, lobby politicians,

and address the public about online safety concerns; many of these professionals gather at events like the Family Online Safety Institute's annual conference (<http://www.fosi.org/>).

Although there are a variety of different fears and anxieties related to young people's use of the Internet, three types of online safety issues tend to dominate public discourse: sexual victimization by strangers met online, bullying and harassment, and exposure to problematic content. These are the three core online safety concerns that the Internet Safety Technical Task Force took up when it reviewed scholarly literature concerning children's online safety-related risks (Palfrey et al., 2010) and these play a central role in the EU Kids Online Report as well (Livingstone et al., 2011). They are also in line with other types of classifications used in the literature such as the "contact," "content," and "conduct" behaviors examined by Ponte and Simões (2009). Most of these concerns center on how children may be harmed, but issues of children harming others also arise vis-à-vis bullying.

In this article, we examine parents' concerns about salient online safety-related issues. The goal of this paper is to consider the factors associated with parents' fear regarding their children's online behavior. Specifically, the article examines five prevalent concerns that have shaped public conversations about online safety:

- (1) Children will meet a stranger who will harm them. Children will be exposed to pornographic content.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) Children will be exposed to violent content.
- (3) Children will be bullied.
- (4) Children will bully other children.

In analyzing these issues, we do not presume to assert that there is an appropriate or acceptable level of fear nor do we cleanly distinguish between concern and fear. Rather, we recognize that parents have reason to be concerned about these issues while also recognizing that these issues are at the source of widespread fears regarding children's use of the Internet. Instead of trying to determine what would distinguish fear from concern, we seek to understand how parents differ in their approaches to these issues. Presumably, concerns manifest as fears when they differ from the norm. With that in mind, we seek to address the following two research questions:

- RQ1: Do parental fears vary by demographics and other background factors?
- RQ2: Are negative online safety experiences related to parental fear?

## Data and Methods

We draw on a U.S. nationally representative survey of parents and guardians<sup>2</sup> with children aged 10–14 in their household, conducted in Summer 2011. In this section, we describe the data collection process and explain how we measured the variables of interest.



### *Data Collection*

Our data set consists of a national sample of 1,007 English-speaking U.S. parents age 26 and over who have children living with them between the ages of 10–14. We excluded parents working in the software industry.<sup>3</sup> The research firm Harris Interactive administered the data collection online on July 5–14, 2011 using a sample obtained through Research Now's e-Rewards panel. The panel was invitation only, opt-in and offered potential respondents an incentive in the form of a drawing for a reward. Invitations to the survey were sent to a stratified random sample of U.S. residents pre-profiled for being age 26 or older and having a 10- to 14-year-old child in the household. Up to three invitation reminders were sent to potential respondents. On average, people spent 19 minutes filling out the survey. The authors conducted all analyses, not Harris Interactive.

### *Background Variables*

Respondents reflect varied demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Table 1 for both unweighted and weighted descriptive statistics). We asked respondents in what year they were born and calculated their age from that information. Participants reported their income and education by choosing from multiple categories, which we recoded into four dummy variables for income and three for education. We asked respondents about their Hispanic origin first and then followed up with a question about their race, offering multiple categories including "mixed race." Those who reported being of mixed race were then asked their primary racial affiliation. We recoded these answers into five categories: non-Hispanic Whites, Hispanics, non-Hispanic Blacks/African Americans, non-Hispanic Asians/Asian Americans, and non-Hispanic Native Americans/Other. Due to the small size of the last category, we exclude those people from the analyses that consider racial background.

To assess metropolitan status, we asked respondents "which of the following best describes where you live" with urban, suburban, and rural as options. For political ideology, we posed a question about how people would describe their "own political philosophy." We recoded both of these into dummy variables (yes or no for urban, suburban, and rural residence; and yes or no for liberal, moderate, and conservative ideology). To get a sense of people's religiosity, we asked the frequency with which people attend religious services aside from weddings and funerals. We recoded this variable into a dummy variable distinguishing between those who attend religious services weekly or more often and those who do so less. On the whole, there are some missing values on race/ethnicity and income, but otherwise there is information for every respondent on all of the other variables.

The data in the analyses were weighted to known demographics of U.S. residents ages 26 and older who have at least one child aged 10–14 living with them in the household based on the 2010 Current Population Survey of the U.S.

**Table 1.** Background of Study Participants ( $N = 1,007$ )

	Unweighted	Weighted	<i>N</i>
Gender			1,007
Female	57%	57%	
Male	43%	43%	
Age			1,007
Mean	41 years	42 years	
Median	41 years	42 years	
Race and ethnicity			992
African American/Black, non-Hispanic	14%	12%	
Asian American/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	7%	4%	
Hispanic	17%	18%	
White, non-Hispanic	60%	64%	
Other	2%	2%	
Education			1,007
High school or less	24%	40%	
Some college or Associate's degree	36%	29%	
College or more	40%	31%	
Household income			939
Less than \$50 K	29%	34%	
\$50–74.9 K	23%	20%	
\$75–99.9 K	21%	15%	
\$100 K or more	27%	31%	
Region of U.S.			1,007
East	27%	21%	
Midwest	25%	23%	
South	24%	31%	
West	24%	24%	
Metro area			1,007
Urban	22%	22%	
Suburban	55%	52%	
Rural	23%	26%	
Political ideology			1,007
Liberal	17%	17%	
Moderate	52%	51%	
Conservative	31%	32%	
Religiosity—attends services weekly or more often	46%	47%	1,007
Age and gender of child			1,007
10-year-old female	7%	7%	
11-year-old female	11%	11%	
12-year-old female	12%	13%	
13-year-old female	11%	12%	
14-year-old female	4%	5%	
10-year-old male	11%	8%	
11-year-old male	13%	12%	
12-year-old male	15%	13%	
13-year-old male	10%	13%	
14-year-old male	6%	6%	

Bureau of Labor Statistics. Weighting demographics include: biological sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, household income, region of the country, number of children in the household, and age/gender of children in the household. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online. We use the weighted data throughout this article.



*Child Choice for Focus of Parent Responses*

Respondents were asked to list the age and gender of each child living with them. Respondents qualified for the survey if they reported having at least one child living with them between ages 10 and 14. If respondents reported having more than one such child then they were assigned one child to focus on throughout the survey. The child chosen was the one as close to the age of 12 as possible. This age was chosen because it was just under the age required to participate on many social media sites (13) and the goal of the broader study was to focus on parents' attitudes about underage usage of social media (boyd, Hargittai, et al., 2011). The last 10 rows of Table 1 show the distribution of the children who were the focus of parents' responses by age and gender. To ensure that respondents continued to focus on the same child throughout the survey, all questions asking about the child's behavior included a reference to the age and gender of the child.

*Fears About and Experiences With Online Safety-Related Issues*

To assess parents' level of fear about the possible occurrence of various online safety-related incidents, we first asked them an open-ended question about their fears and then asked them to rate their level of concern regarding specific issues. The open-ended question was worded as follows: "As a parent, what is the biggest fear you have about your [son/daughter]'s use of websites and online services like email, chat and Facebook?" While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the responses to that question in detail, it is helpful to note that the answers we received to that question match the issues we then asked about specifically in the closed-ended question that followed. That next question was worded as such: "How concerned are you that your [insert gender/age of child] might experience each of the following online?" Answer options ranged from "not at all concerned" to "extremely concerned" on a 5-point scale. Here, we analyze parents' fears with respect to their child potentially experiencing the following:

1. Meeting a stranger who means to do harm.
2. Being exposed to pornographic content.
3. Being exposed to violent content.
4. Being a victim of online bullying.
5. Bullying another child online.

Additionally, we also asked parents to report actual experiences any of their children have had with the above-listed incidents. In this case, to be inclusive, we asked not just about the experiences of the child who served as the basis for most other questions, but rather, about all of the parents' children's experiences (exact survey question wording: "Have *any* of your children ever experienced any of the following online?").

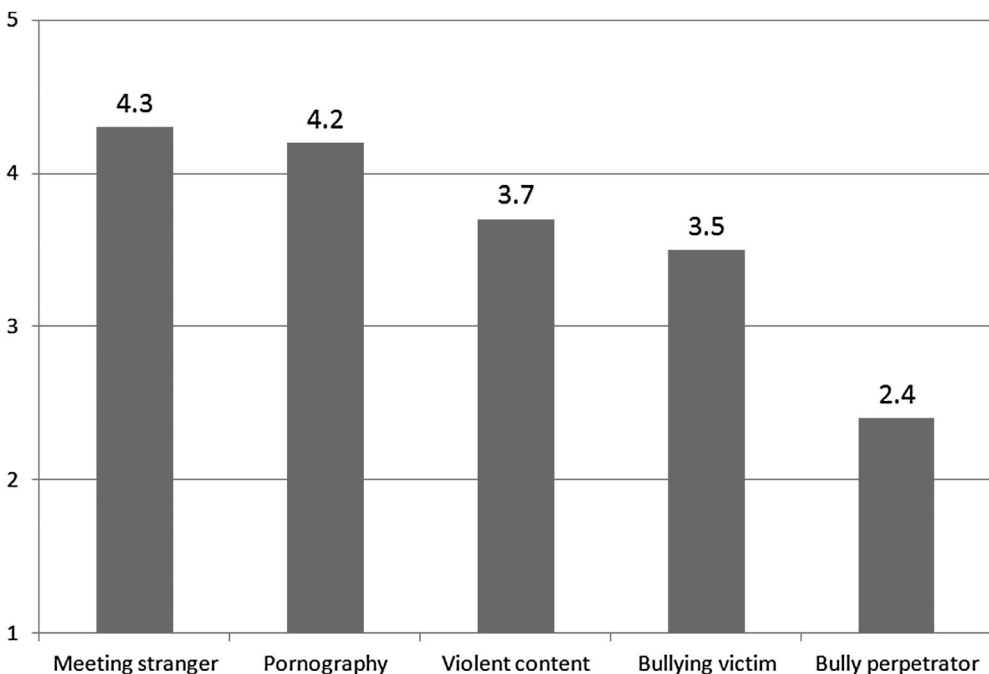
### Analyses

First, we look at basic descriptive statistics to establish the level of fear and experiences with online safety-related issues. Next, we present bivariate statistics to explore how fear relates to parental background and the child in question (parent's gender, education, income, race/ethnicity, religiosity, political ideology, metropolitan status, as well as child's gender and age). Finally, we look at the results of ordinary least squares regressions to explain differences in parental fears about the five online safety-related issues.

## Results

### *Parental Concerns With Respect to Online Safety-Related Issues*

Figure 1 shows the average level of concern regarding the possibility of the parent's child meeting a stranger, being exposed to pornography, being exposed to violent content, being a bullying victim, or being a bully perpetrator, in order of fear level. For four out of the five (all, except the child being a bully her/himself), parents, on average, report being at least "concerned." In the case of the possibility of meeting a stranger and being exposed to pornography, the average response is over "very concerned."



**Figure 1.** Overall Levels of Concern by Online Safety-Related Issue on a 1–5 Scale.

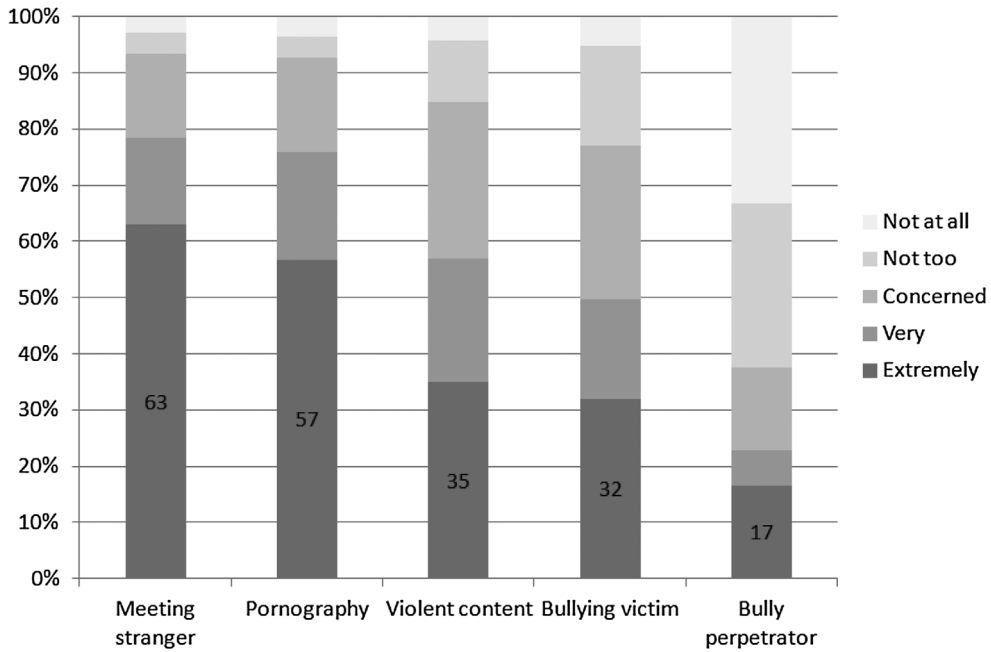


Figure 2. Levels of Concern by Online Safety-Related Issue.

Figure 2 breaks down the level of concern for each type of possible incident. These data reveal that almost two-thirds (63 percent) of parents are “extremely concerned” that their child might meet a stranger online, and over half (57 percent) are “extremely concerned” that their child might be exposed to pornography. Such extreme levels of concern are lower for violent content (just over a third at 35 percent), for being a bullying victim (just under a third at 32 percent), and for being a bully perpetrator (less than a fifth at 17 percent). At the opposite end of the scale, it is rare that parents are not at all concerned about the listed possible occurrences. While a third claim not to be concerned at all about the child becoming a bully perpetrator, only 5 percent are not at all concerned about their child becoming a victim of bullying and even fewer do not list any concern about meeting strangers, exposure to pornography, and exposure to violent content.

*Variation in Parental Concerns With Respect to Online Safety-Related Issues*

Although many parents express concern regarding various online safety-related issues, their concerns are not uniform across population groups. Our findings suggest that parents from particular backgrounds are considerably more likely to be concerned about various online safety-related issues than others. Here, we break down level of concern about the five possible incidents we explore by parental background: parent’s gender, education, income, race/ethnicity, religiosity, political ideology, and metropolitan status. Table 2 presents

**Table 2.** Levels of Parental Concern (1–5 Scale) by Background

Background	Meeting stranger	Pornography	Violent content	Bully victim	Bully perpetrator
Male parent/guardian	4.30	4.20	3.64	3.40**	3.48
Female parent/guardian	4.33	4.23	3.80 <sup>#</sup>	3.64**	3.56
Parental income					
Less than \$50K	4.30	4.22	3.71	3.69**	2.66***
\$50–74.9K	4.31	4.26	3.68	3.63	2.53
\$75–99.9K	4.46*	4.31	3.87*	3.51	2.40
\$100K or more	4.28	4.11 <sup>#</sup>	3.64	3.28***	2.11***
Parental education					
High school or less	4.36	4.21	3.79	3.69**	2.68***
Some college	4.40	4.23	3.63 <sup>#</sup>	3.42*	2.25**
College or more	4.19**	4.20	3.73	3.45	2.30*
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	4.19***	4.09***	3.59***	3.37***	2.18***
Hispanic	4.48*	4.39*	3.95**	3.83**	3.01***
African American, non-Hispanic	4.50*	4.34 <sup>#</sup>	3.88*	3.66	2.51
Asian American, non-Hispanic	4.59*	4.60**	3.99*	4.02***	2.97***
Religious					
No	4.33	4.19	3.72	3.48	2.44
Yes	4.31	4.25	3.73	3.60	2.43
Political ideology					
Liberal	4.11**	3.96***	3.68	3.57	2.67*
Moderate	4.41**	4.23	3.75	3.60	2.44
Conservative	4.28	4.33*	3.71	3.42*	2.31 <sup>#</sup>
Metro status					
Urban	4.49**	4.40**	4.10***	3.80***	2.90***
Suburban	4.29	4.21	3.60**	3.46*	2.26***
Rural	4.24	4.08*	3.64	3.48	2.39
Child's gender					
Male	4.23**	4.19	3.65*	3.52	2.44
Female	4.42**	4.25	3.81*	3.55	2.43
Child's age					
10 years old	4.45 <sup>#</sup>	4.33	3.98**	3.56	2.60 <sup>#</sup>
11 years old	4.37	4.36*	3.81	3.55	2.37
12 years old	4.29	4.15	3.67	3.55	2.49
13 years old	4.29	4.22	3.69	3.61	2.39
14 years old	4.16	3.90**	3.37**	3.28*	2.33

<sup>#</sup> $p \leq 0.1$ . \* $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

the average level of concern by type of parental background across the five safety-related issues. The asterisks signal whether the level of concern is statistically significantly different between the subgroups of each background variable. Regarding parent's gender, findings suggest that female parents are more concerned than male parents about their child being a bully victim, but we see few other differences by parent's gender. Socioeconomic status—both in terms of income and education level—seems to influence parental concern levels when it comes to the child becoming a bully victim or a bully perpetrator. Those from less privileged backgrounds exhibit considerably higher levels of fear regarding the bullying-related issues than those who are more educated or who have a higher income. The differences are not so pronounced when it comes to concerns

about meeting a stranger, where the main finding is that those with at least a college education are less concerned than others. When it comes to exposure to pornography or violent content, socioeconomic status does not seem to be related to levels of concern.

With respect to race and ethnicity, findings suggest that there is considerable variation across groups when it comes to concerns about online safety-related issues. Non-Hispanic White parents are least concerned across all five categories while Asian parents are the most concerned. However, the relative fear they express about the different issues is, for the most part, constant across Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, mirroring the general patterns seen in Figure 1 whereby meeting strangers is the biggest concern to most groups (except for Asians for whom exposure to pornography is a bigger issue) and being a bully perpetrator and a bully victim raises the least amount of concern regardless of race/ethnicity.

Religiosity does not seem to relate to levels of concern with respect to any of the five safety-related issues. Political ideology, however, shows some relationship to fear about meeting strangers (liberals are less concerned about this, especially as compared to moderates) and viewing pornography (liberals are less concerned than conservatives). Metropolitan status is also related to fear levels. Those living in urban areas tend to be more concerned about all five types of safety-related issues.

When we asked parents to report on their level of concern, we asked them to think about a specific child in their household. Whether that child was a boy or a girl influenced the reported level of concern in the case of meeting strangers and exposure to violent content. In both cases, parents reporting about their daughters expressed a higher level of concern than parents expressing concern with respect to their sons. As to child's age, not surprisingly, for all issues assessed, parents tend to have higher fears when reflecting on their concerns about younger offspring (ages 10–11) than older ones (age 14).

### *Experiences With Online Safety-Related Issues*

Figure 3 shows how many parents reported any of their children having had experiences with the various online safety-related issues.<sup>4</sup> The most commonly reported issue was of exposure to pornography, which less than a fifth (17 percent) reported their child having experienced. At 14 percent, the next most common incident was exposure to violent content, followed by 6 percent of parents reporting having a child who had been bullied, and a very small proportion having a child who had perpetrated bullying or who had met a stranger online who did them harm (1 and 2 percent, respectively).

How do fears line up with actual prior experiences? Figure 4 presents standardized numbers to compare how level of concern lines up with experiences. There is a large discrepancy between what parents fear the most and what parents report their children having actually experienced. This is most out of sync for meeting strangers, which is the most feared incident yet the least likely to

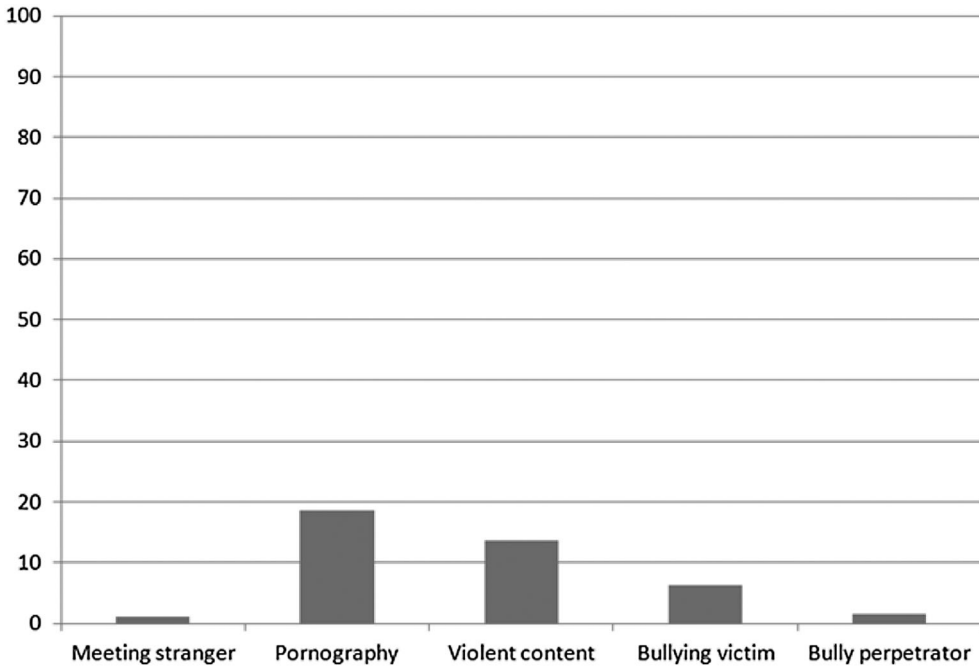


Figure 3. Prior Experience of Incidents by Any of Parents' Children.

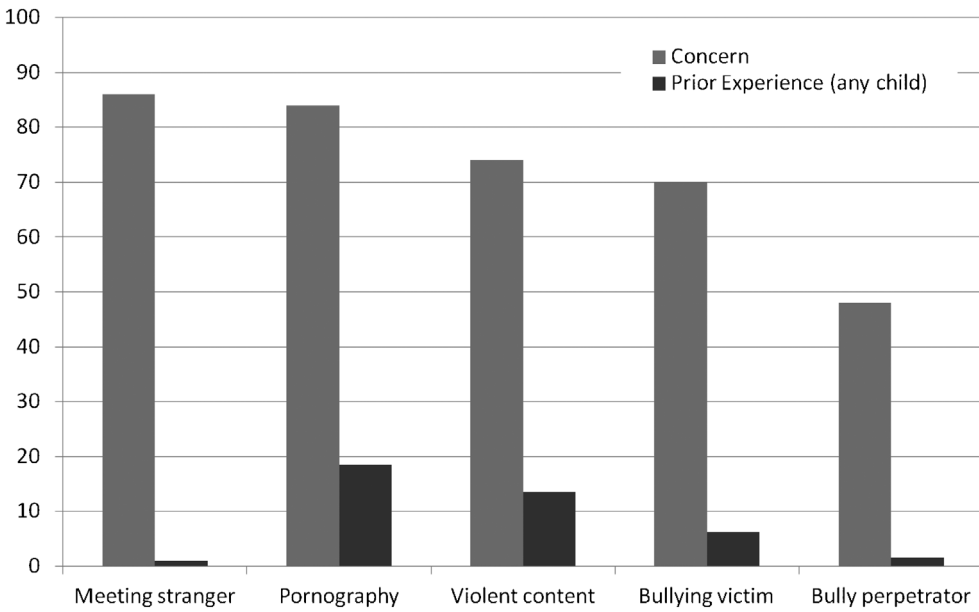


Figure 4. Concern and Prior Experiences of Online Safety-Related Issues.\*

\*The 1-5 Concern Scale is Depicted on a 1-100 Scale to Compare to Percentage of Experience.

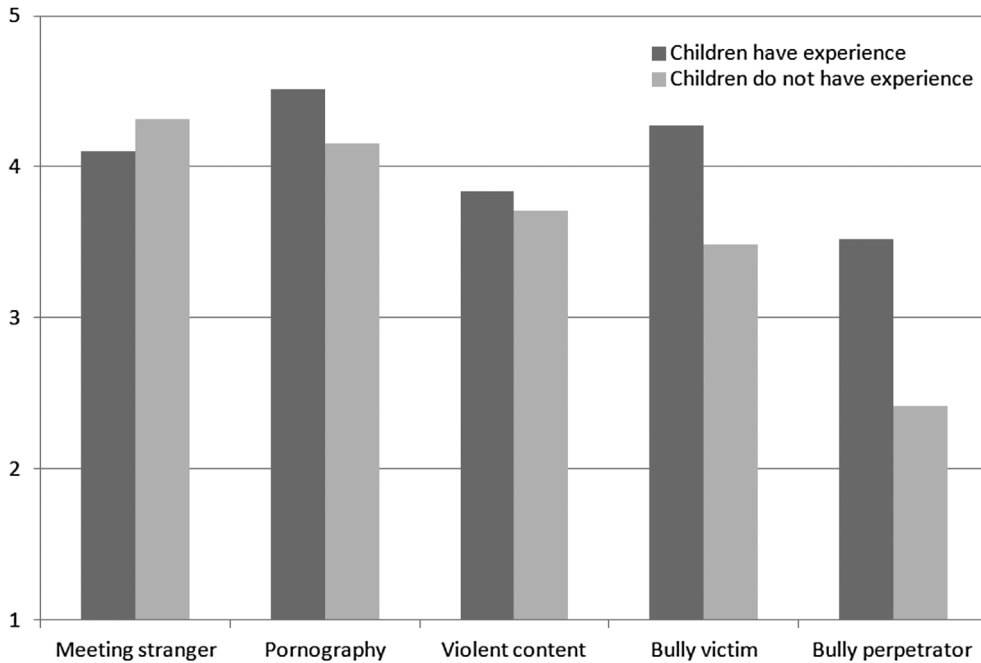


Figure 5. Parents' Level of Concern (1–5 Scale) by Whether Their Children Have Experienced Online Safety-Related Issues.

have happened. Figure 5 and Table 3 present these data in a different way, by comparing the average level of concern expressed by those whose children have experienced the incident with those who have not. We find a statistically significant difference by experience for having experienced pornography, being a bully victim, and being a bully perpetrator. Having children who have experienced bullying seems to result in an especially notable difference in level of concern. Might different levels of experiences with the incidents explain the different levels of fear we observe across demographic groups? To answer this question, we turn to the results of regression analyses explaining variation in the five fear levels.

*Explaining Differences in Parental Concern With Respect to Online Safety-Related Issues*

Table 4 presents the results of OLS regression analyses for each of the five online safety-related concerns examined in this article as outcomes. Compared to

Table 3. Parents' Level of Concern (1–5 Scale) by Whether Their Children Have Experienced Online Safety-Related Issues

	Meeting stranger	Pornography	Violent content	Bully victim	Bully perpetrator
Children have experience	4.10	4.51***	3.84	4.27***	3.52**
Children do not have experience	4.32	4.15***	3.71	3.49***	2.42**

#p ≤ 0.1. \*p ≤ 0.05. \*\*p ≤ 0.01. \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001.



Table 4. OLS Regression Explaining Differences in Parental Concern About Online Safety-Related Issues

	Meeting stranger	Pornography	Violent content	Bully victim	Bully perpetrator
Background					
Female	0.099 (0.070)	0.099 (0.071)	0.254*** (0.077)	0.277*** (0.082)	-0.042 (0.091)
Parental education (base: High school or less)					
Some college	0.037 (0.085)	-0.032 (0.087)	-0.145 (0.094)	-0.166 (0.099)	-0.177 (0.111)
College or more	-0.181* (0.093)	0.022 (0.095)	0.006 (0.103)	-0.104 (0.109)	0.020 (0.122)
Parental income (base: Less than \$50K)					
\$50–74.9 K	0.067 (0.099)	0.028 (0.101)	0.028 (0.109)	0.009 (0.115)	-0.042 (0.129)
\$75–99.9 K	0.251* (0.113)	0.072 (0.116)	0.246 (0.124)	-0.100 (0.132)	-0.147 (0.147)
\$100 or more	0.167* (0.098)	-0.074 (0.100)	0.110* (0.108)	-0.193 (0.114)	-0.364** (0.127)
Race/ethnicity (base: White, non-Hispanic)					
Hispanic	0.290* (0.096)	0.329*** (0.098)	0.359*** (0.106)	0.374*** (0.112)	0.679*** (0.125)
Black/African American, non-Hispanic	0.305** (0.111)	0.253** (0.113)	0.206 (0.122)	0.154 (0.129)	0.014 (0.145)
Asian/Asian American, non-Hispanic	0.415* (0.172)	0.561*** (0.176)	0.439* (0.190)	0.691*** (0.201)	0.739*** (0.224)
Metro status (base: suburban)					
Urban	0.125 (0.094)	0.084 (0.096)	0.451*** (0.104)	0.180 (0.110)	0.380** (0.123)
Rural	-0.013 (0.084)	-0.113 (0.086)	0.093 (0.093)	0.034 (0.098)	0.158 (0.110)
Religiosity	-0.017 (0.072)	-0.060 (0.073)	-0.017 (0.079)	0.141 (0.083)	0.061 (0.093)
Political ideology (base: Conservative)					
Liberal	-0.199* (0.105)	-0.429*** (0.107)	-0.141 (0.115)	0.086 (0.122)	0.214 (0.136)
Moderate	0.125 (0.080)	-0.130 (0.082)	-0.032 (0.088)	0.183* (0.093)	0.029 (0.104)
Female child	0.124* (0.069)	0.035 (0.071)	0.156 (0.077)	0.004 (0.080)	-0.028 (0.090)
Child's age	-0.080** (0.028)	-0.101*** (0.028)	-0.135*** (0.030)	-0.053 (0.032)	-0.072* (0.036)
Experience	-0.189 (0.325)	0.388** (0.091)	0.252* (0.109)	0.796** (0.160)	0.989* (0.353)
Intercept	4.942 (0.352)	5.336 (0.360)	4.828 (0.387)	3.749 (0.411)	3.120 (0.459)
N	931	931	931	931	931
R <sup>2</sup>	0.0614	0.0766	0.0848	0.0894	0.1061
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.0448	0.0603	0.0687	0.0734	0.0903

# $p \leq 0.1$ . \* $p \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

the figures presented in Table 2, the results in Table 4 reflect the relationship of each variable with the outcome while holding the other factors constant. That is, certain relationships highlighted in Table 2 may not hold once we control for other factors. Table 4 allows us to see what factors remain significant.

While having a child with experiences about the issue is a significant correlate of most levels of concern (all except meeting a stranger), other factors are also related to fear even when controlling for prior experiences. Overall, these findings suggest that, depending on the issue, concern is contingent on the parent's gender, income, race and ethnicity, metropolitan status, and political ideology, as well as on whether the focus of the concern is a daughter or a son, and the age of the child, even when holding other factors constant.

When it comes to concerns about meeting a stranger, those with a college education or more exhibit lower-level fear than those with less than a college education, regardless of the other variables considered. Higher income, on the other hand, is related to higher fears. Compared to non-Hispanic White respondents, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians all have respectively higher levels of concern. Those of a liberal persuasion are less concerned than conservatives. Parents responding about their fears regarding a daughter—versus a son—are more concerned, as are parents of younger children. Female parents and male parents do not differ in how they perceive concerns about meeting strangers, and religiosity is not related to this outcome either. Having any children who have met a harmful stranger online is not related to concerns about this matter, but it is important to note that only 10 respondents (just 1 percent of the sample) reported having such prior experiences, so seeing a statistically significant relationship between experiences and concern is unlikely with such low levels of occurrence.

Regarding exposure to pornography, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are all more concerned than Whites, in increasing magnitudes, respectively, even after controlling for education, income, and other background factors. Political ideology is also related to this fear level, with liberals considerably less anxious about this issue than conservatives. The parents of older children are less concerned about this matter than those reporting about their younger offspring. We observe no differences among female and male parents, those with varying education and income levels, those who are more or less religious, and those who live in urban versus suburban versus rural environments. Having any child with prior experience of being exposed to pornography increases the fear level about this issue.

Concern about exposure to violent content is higher among female parents than male parents, among those with the highest income levels compared to those with the lowest income levels, among Hispanics and Asians as compared to Whites, among urban residents as compared to those living in suburban areas, and among those who are responding regarding a younger versus an older child, even when we control for the numerous other variables of interest in this study. Also, prior experience with a child in the household having been exposed to violent content online also raises the concern level.

When it comes to concern about the respondent's child becoming a victim of bullying, female parents report higher-level fears compared to male parents, Hispanics and Asians are worried more than Whites, and moderates are more concerned than conservatives when holding other variables constant. Prior experience with bullying is an especially strong predictor of this particular issue fear.

Overall, parents are least concerned about their child becoming a bully, but nonetheless, different parental background factors are related to the height of this concern at a statistically significant level, even when controlling for prior experience and other variables. Those with the highest incomes are least concerned as are those reporting about an older child. Hispanics and Asians as compared to Whites, and urban dwellers as compared to those from the suburbs, are more fearful about this matter. Prior experience with this issue is a relatively strong correlate of concern about it.

## Discussion

### *Experience Matters*

It is reasonable that parents who have experienced a negative online safety outcome might be more fearful of that issue than those who have not. And, in our data, for most online safety issues, familial experience is indeed significantly correlated with parental concern. Parents who have a child who has been exposed to pornography or violent content, or who has bullied or been bullied, have greater concern that this will happen to their child. Interestingly, there is one exception to this trend. The small numbers of parents who have a child who has met a harmful stranger are no more likely—and, perhaps, slightly less likely—to fear that their child will meet a stranger who will do them harm. The reason for this is unclear.

### *Fear of Online Sexual Predators*

The salience of stranger-danger in our data is not surprising, given the long history of fears regarding strangers, both online and offline (Finkelhor, 2011; Valentine, 2004; Wolak et al., 2008). Although the few parents who indicated that one of their children did meet a stranger who harmed them may have referred to any number of potential harms, the most conspicuous interpretation of this fear concerns the potential that a stranger might do sexual harm to a child.

Popular TV shows like *To Catch a Predator* have helped drive a moral panic around online sexual predators (Marwick, 2008). In a study conducted by the Center for the Digital Future (2008), more than half of adults agreed with the statement that "online predators are a threat to the children in their households." Internet-enabled sex crimes against children are extraordinarily rare and, on the rare occasion when such a horrible event does occur, it often involves family members or people known to the victim (Mitchell, David, & Janis, 2005).

Nonetheless, although the threat of strangers is both exaggerated and misleading (Wolak et al., 2008), fear of dangerous online strangers is widespread.

In line with prior work, our data reveal a pervasive fear of strangers as well. While we did not explicitly ask whether or not their concern regarding their child meeting a stranger who might do harm was connected to the threat of sexual predation, our open-ended question about parents' greatest fears revealed that this issue was top-of-mind for many parents. Numerous participants referenced "predators," "pedophiles," "sex offenders," "child molesters," and similar terms in their responses.

Whether or not the high levels of fear are warranted is debatable. On the one hand, the potential physical, psychological, and sexual harm caused by such a dangerous encounter would be great. On the other hand, the likelihood of such an incident taking place is extraordinarily small. However, as the analyses of our data suggest, not only is prior experience not related to fear of meeting strangers, specific demographic background factors are connected to fear levels in this domain and others as well. In other words, some types of parents are more concerned than other parents, regardless of experience. This raises questions about how the cost of fear might be borne differently by different families.

### *Family Factors*

Studies on societal fear often find that women are more fearful—with respect to physical safety issues and violent crime—than men (Stanko, 1993). We saw no significant gender-based variance regarding concerns of the child meeting a dangerous stranger, being exposed to pornography, or becoming a bully perpetrator. But we did see significant gender-based variance regarding the child's exposure to violent content and being bullied. This may be because female parents are more generally concerned than their male counterparts about violence, whether online or offline, consumed as content or physically enacted. For example, earlier studies have found that mothers were more likely to limit violent TV content than fathers (Cheng et al., 2004).

Parents of younger children are more concerned that their child might meet a stranger who will harm them or be exposed to pornography or violent content than parents of older children. This is not surprising given that younger children are widely believed to be more vulnerable, less capable of assessing whether or not someone is dangerous, and less equipped to handle inappropriate content. While parents of younger children are not more worried that their child will be bullied than parents of older children, they are more concerned that their child will perpetrate bullying. This may be because parents of younger children are concerned that their child is not mature enough to understand that their actions might hurt someone. It is interesting though that parents of older children are no less concerned that their child will be victimized than those of younger children. This may be because bullying is at its highest during middle school, which most frequently includes those who are 14.

### *The Role of Metropolitan Status and Political Ideology*

Parents living in urban environments are more likely to be concerned about their child being exposed to violent content or becoming a perpetrator of bullying than their suburban counterparts, even when controlling for other factors. While we have no obvious explanation for this, this discrepancy may be connected to the greater levels of violent crime that occur in urban environments (Truman & Smith, 2012, Table 7) thereby making violent acts more salient in parents' minds, which they then translate to online environments as well.

As noted in our presentation of the findings above, liberal parents are significantly less likely to be concerned that their child will be exposed to pornography than conservative parents; they are also less concerned that their child will meet a stranger who will harm them. These ideological differences may be connected to media coverage; it may be that media outlets catering to conservative and liberal audiences offer different coverage regarding the issues of sexual predation and pornography. It may also be rooted in the very notion of conservatism; those who are conservative may have less appetite for change brought about as a result of technology (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). More work in this area will be necessary to disentangle this relationship.

### *The Role of Race and Ethnicity*

While there are several significant differences among parents of various backgrounds, the most salient pertains to race and ethnicity, a finding that holds across all parental concerns. Parents of Hispanic and Asian descent are significantly more likely to be concerned about all online safety-related issues than White parents, even when holding for all other factors we explore in this paper. Black parents are also significantly more concerned than White parents with regard to children meeting harmful strangers or being exposed to pornography, but not the other issues.

While income and education are also related to certain concerns, these socioeconomic factors become less salient when taking race and ethnicity into account at the same time. In other words, race and ethnicity play the most significant role in explaining differences in parental concern among the demographic factors considered in this study.

Earlier studies on fears of crime have found that Blacks are more likely to be afraid than Whites (Ortega & Myles, 1987), but there are few other studies that help explain why differences in fear might be correlated with race. Due to the dearth of studies comparing Hispanics and Asians to other groups in the realm of fears, it is difficult to draw on prior work to explain these findings.

While our data do not show higher levels of negative experiences with respect to online safety-related issues by race and ethnicity, others' research has shown that people of color are more likely to experience other forms of negativity online, such as racism and hatred (Daniels, 2009).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in other domains,

such as health care, people of color have shown lower levels of trust in services because of historical and ongoing discrimination in health care settings (Boulware, Cooper, Ratner, LaVeist, & Powe, 2003), suggesting that they may be less likely to trust—and thus, more likely to fear—new settings like the Internet. Finally, what happens online and off is imbricated, making it challenging to understand people's online fears without also understanding more broadly lived experiences (Sassen, 2002). What our data might be suggesting is how racism more broadly shapes parents' fears.

It is clear from our data that parents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are exhibiting different levels of concern about online safety-related issues, but getting at why these differences are so salient requires additional work. These results raise important questions for future research and highlight why it is important to collect data on diverse populations and not to assume uniform attitudes across population groups.

### Conclusion

Most parents express high levels of concern regarding online safety-related matters, but prior experiences with the issues alone do not explain their fears. There is significant variation in level of concern among parents, some of which is explained by demographic background, as we discussed above. Overall, it is important to recognize that parental concern varies considerably by parental background.

How parents incorporate concerns into their lives and turn their concerns into fears informs their parenting practices, affects their children's activities and behavior, drives technological development in the online safety arena, and shapes public discourse and policy (Bernstein & Triger, 2010; Clark, 2012; Finkelhor, 2011; Nelson, 2010). When parents are afraid, they may respond by restricting access to technologies in an effort to protect their children from perceived dangers. Yet, the efficacy of such restrictions is unclear. To what degree do restrictions help protect young people from online safety-related risks? Are parents successfully addressing online safety-related risks through their actions? Are those who are more fearful more successful at protecting their children?

Heightened fear has serious consequences for young people, parents, and society more generally (Livingstone, 2009). Moral panics and the "culture of fear" can have severe societal ramifications when fear prompts people to be more isolated and less engaged with public life (Furedi, 2006; Glassner, 2000). However, little is known about the repercussions of parents' fears about online safety-related issues. How does parental fear affect learning outcomes? How does it affect children's abilities to socialize and develop interpersonally? These are important questions to consider for future research.

In his article on "juvenioia," Finkelhor (2011) argues that Internet fears reflect broader concerns about how living in a diverse and changing society overwhelms parents' ability to raise their children with their values. Given differences in concern and fear among parents, this raises questions about the degree to which

these fears are rooted more generally in parents worrying about their children being exposed to values and beliefs that are different from those espoused in their homes. In other words, to what degree are the differences in concern that we are measuring indicative of broader levels of fear among different demographic groups?

While our data are unable to address the consequences and ramifications of parental fears, our findings do highlight that fear is not evenly distributed across the population. In online safety debates, there is a tendency to assume that all parents are the same even though this has never been shown to be the case. Unfortunately, though, we have very little sense for differences among parents when it comes to socio-technical issues. This study highlights the ways in which there are significant differences among parents with respect to fears of online safety-related issues. Some of these differences have to do with demographic factors. Although our data are unable to address why these differences exist, they make it clear that more work is needed to understand how these differences play out and what they mean for efforts to address online safety.

Most online safety policy directives focus on protecting children, but give little consideration for the impact that such initiatives might have on the parents that the laws are intended to serve. Given the differences in parental concerns, more research is needed to understand how parents perceive the various regulatory approaches designed to help them protect their children.

As new technologies emerge and new concerns surface, policymakers continue to look for ways of addressing potential threats to children's safety. While our findings do not provide a particular pathway for policymakers, they do highlight the challenges of addressing the perspectives of different constituencies. By providing empirical evidence that shows how parental concern is not uniform when it comes to online safety-related issues, this article offers insight intended to support policy conversations about these matters. Before developing policies intended to empower parents or designing technologies with parents in mind, we need to be asking: Which parents, and in turn, which children?

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1. Although exposure to pornographic and violent content is often the product of intentionally seeking it out, the public rhetoric in the United States tends to focus on the language of exposure. We decided to use this language both because of its cultural dominance and because we did not feel as though clarifying accidental exposure and intentional exploration was necessary.
2. Throughout the article, we refer to the parent or guardian who answered the survey as the parent.
3. We excluded parents working in the software industry so as not to bias toward people who may be more familiar with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. This issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but was central to our study in boyd, Hargittai, et al. (2011).
4. We are measuring what parents report; this does not account for children's experiences of which parents are unaware.
5. We looked at occurrence of experiences by demographic factors and found no differences by race and ethnicity.

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