



ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN: AN ALARMING TREND

New technologies are facilitating the online sexual exploitation of children, including the live-streaming of sexual abuse of children using web cameras or cellphones, often for profit. Mobile devices also provide new and evolving means by which offenders sexually abuse children as apps are being used to target, recruit, and coerce children to engage in sexual activity. Experts believe tens of thousands of children globally are sexually exploited online, and the number appears to be growing. The victims may be boys or girls, ranging from very young children to adolescents, and hailing from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

The process often begins when an offender gains access to a potential child victim and, through psychological manipulation and coercion, grooms the child for sexual exploitation. The offender then connects via the internet with a paying client who often specifically requests a child. The child is further victimized through commercial sexual exploitation and abuse and the live-streaming of commercial sex acts. Perpetrators can pay to direct the sexual abuse of children from anywhere in the world while the abuse takes place in private homes, Internet cafes, or “cyber dens” in or near the child’s community. Disturbingly, closed and highly protected online communities dedicated to the sexual abuse of children have proliferated. Children have been reported to be victims of this crime in Colombia, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States. Many countries, including Australia, Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and the United States, have prosecuted perpetrators—both paying clients and offenders who facilitate the exploitation of the child.

In the Philippines, where many are impoverished and nearly half of the population is connected to the internet, numerous individuals in poor communities reportedly earn income from this type of child exploitation. Online sessions can be conducted at low cost using a cellphone or a computer with a webcam. Connections to prospective clients are made easily; clients remain anonymous and make payments by wire transfer. Children, often naked, have been exploited on camera—including by family members or neighbors—and coerced into exhibiting themselves and performing sex acts for the viewing of individuals watching online. In many cases, family members justify facilitating the online sexual exploitation by asserting that it is not harmful to the child, especially in cases where there is no direct physical contact with the child. This lack of understanding of the detrimental psychological, developmental, and physical impact of this crime on children, the complicity of relatives, and the easy flow of money have contributed to the practice becoming more prevalent.

Another growing threat to children is sextortion, which is a form of online sexual exploitation of children where offenders hack, coerce, deceive or otherwise obtain incriminating photos or information from a child and then threaten exposure if that child does not perform sex acts via web cameras.

The online sexual exploitation of children presents new challenges for law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and victim service providers. Law enforcement and prosecutors in most countries have little training or experience in detecting this crime, conducting online investigations, obtaining evidence from internet service providers, and presenting relevant evidence in court. Enhanced mechanisms of encryption by the offenders, such as networks of technologies and platforms that obfuscate traditional IP addresses, have also delayed or complicated investigations. In addition, difficulties in obtaining the cooperation of family members and others who facilitate the crime is a widespread challenge in these cases, as is the lack of specialized trauma-informed care and services for the child victims, especially boys.

Despite such challenges, governments, international organizations, and NGOs are working together to address the online sexual exploitation of children. Successful detection and prosecution of perpetrators requires advanced cybercrime investigative skills, criminal laws and procedures that secure cyber evidence and allow for prosecution of crimes committed online, specialized training for prosecutors and judges, cross-border law enforcement cooperation, and specialized care for child victims. The low financial cost of this criminal enterprise (an internet connection and a mobile device or computer-linked webcam), coupled with its low risk nature (as seen by the relatively small number of convictions globally) and high profitability are driving the rapid growth of online sexual exploitation of children. To reverse this trend, governments must rally significant political will and resources to hold perpetrators accountable, provide comprehensive services to child victims, and prevent the crime from occurring.