



Protecting God's Children for Adults

Increased Online Exploitation of Children Expected During Crises

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Ongoing crises that happen in our world tend to not only have direct effects of the individual crisis itself, but there can be other varied types of indirect, long-lasting effects, too. For example, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis continues to spur additional consequences that are incredibly challenging for the protection of children. A particularly alarming one was recently raised from *WePROTECT Global Alliance*.¹ *WePROTECT* is an international organization consisting of major companies (such as Apple, Microsoft and Facebook), civic organizations including Save the Children and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, as well as over 95 countries (including the United States). The central mission of *WePROTECT* is to end child sexual exploitation online.



WePROTECT identifies specific factors resulting from the effects of the global pandemic that have already caused a substantial increase in online child sexual exploitation. For example, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children has seen a 106% increase in reports of suspected online child sexual exploitation since March of 2019. Another organization in the UK that monitors online chat rooms used by abusers reports that offenders are sharing new ideas on how to exploit children during the pandemic lockdowns.²

We know from experience that criminals are quick to adjust the way they operate to new circumstances. The new, unusual circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are no different. These new modes of soliciting children have resulted in a surge in attempts by offenders to contact children through social media. There has also been a significant increase in the downloading and file sharing of child sexual abuse material of all kinds. As a result, the number of public complaints through hotlines to law enforcement have also been increasing in some areas.³

The pandemic has resulted in everyone, including children, spending more time online. In addition, the need for livestreaming classes and other services has dramatically expanded our familiarity with "real time" video communication. As a result of these changes and the current uncertainty in general, many children may be extremely stressed, which can increase their vulnerability to child abusers who are taking advantage of the current situation.

Unsupervised Internet activity can increase children's risk of being exposed to online sexual exploitation. As caring adults, families, and communities who care about the welfare of children, we must remain on high alert and increase our own diligence in monitoring the online activities of children and modeling appropriate behavior. That may be difficult to do as some parents are still working from home and there may not be many programs or activities available for their children outside the home. Implementing basic safety standards, such as using monitoring software and having frequent conversations with children regarding technology safety can help keep children safe when they are online. Caring adults involved in the lives of children may also contribute to reducing others' household stress by checking in frequently and identifying where burdens can be lightened.

Offenders are also affected by the pandemic's impact. While it is certainly no excuse, their stress levels are raised as well, which can lead to them seeking and performing more illegal activities online. Offenders often do not have any other outside social support systems, and this factor alone results in a higher risk for children.⁴ This means several factors have coalesced to create unusually high risk—increased stress and therefore vulnerability in children, higher stress on offenders, as well as increased stress on parents who have more to do, yet less time and assistance in order to accomplish everything. These conditions allow for the

possibility of an unfortunate increase for online child sexual exploitation.

VIRTUS has always championed taking measures to ensure that children are safer in person, and online. In addition, *WePROTECT* has echoed these steps, and provided additional ones,⁵ in order to provide the best possible opportunity to protect children during this time. For example:

- Talk with your children about the risks of online activity
- Stay involved in their digital world—know where they are going online and oversee these sites and apps
- Know who they are connecting with online—people are not always who they seem
- Use all the privacy and security settings available
- Block and report⁶ anyone that makes the youth, or you, uncomfortable (you should report any exploitative online material to <https://report.cybertip.org/>). You can also report directly in the app or website for elements that are against the policy.

Raising the bar on diligence can be difficult at a time when we are inclined to loosen up due to stress and limited options. However, research and data tell us that the increased online risk to our children is not likely to disappear as things return to some semblance of "normal." It is up to us, as caring adults and protectors of children, to remain vigilant, to follow steps designed to provide safety, and to each do our part in protecting children and youth in all environments.

References:

1. *WePROTECT Global Alliance* Intelligence Brief: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION, April 13, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5630f48de4b00a75476ecf0a/t/5ebc58d038eb072b909874ca/1589401809129/Impact+of+COVID-19+on+Online+Child+Sexual+Exploitation.pdf>
2. Ibid at 2.
3. Ibid at 2-3.
4. Ibid at 5.
5. <https://www.end-violence.org/safeonlinecovid>
6. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Tipline for online reports or incidents of exploitation. Hyperlink address is: <https://report.cybertip.org/>

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WePROTECT Global Alliance Intelligence Brief

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

This briefing paper brings together and assesses the currently available material on the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on online child sexual exploitation.¹

SUMMARY FINDINGS

- It is highly probable that numbers of online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) cases will increase during the period of COVID-19 restrictions.
- Greater unsupervised internet use means children are likely to be exposed to greater risk of sexual exploitation online, including sexual coercion, extortion and manipulation by offenders. Exchange of self-generated material is also likely to increase, as children are now experiencing most of their social lives only online.
- The increase in the numbers of emotionally vulnerable children poses greater risk for increased grooming by offenders.
- Isolation due to COVID-19 is likely to increase the probability of offenders acting on their impulses.
- Economic hardship and the inability of offenders to travel due to COVID-19 lockdown is likely to increase the potential for livestreaming abuse in home environments. Livestreaming is also likely to increase due to the higher production of self-generated sexual content by children themselves.
- COVID-19 restrictions are disrupting reporting services, with current systems still reliant on human moderation.
- The current focus within governments and law enforcements on COVID-19, and disruption caused by associated protective measures, are leading to lower prioritisation of online child sexual exploitation in many jurisdictions.

¹COVID-19 has now been declared a global pandemic, with immediate and far-reaching consequences for parents, carers and children themselves. For a wider perspective on COVID-19 pandemic and its implications see 'Protecting Children During The COVID-19 Outbreak' (EVAC), accessible at <https://www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak#coping>.

GROWTH IN OCSE CASES DURING LOCKDOWN

1. The global COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictive measures, have disrupted millions of lives, including those of our children. We assess that the current environment has exacerbated existing drivers of online child sexual exploitation², providing new opportunities for abusers.
2. Although it is too early to see substantive changes in terms of quantitative data³, reporting from stakeholders indicates that it is highly probable that numbers of online child sexual abuse cases will increase:
 - Specialist cybersecurity company Web-IQ has revealed that between February 2020 and the end of March 2020 there has been an increase of over 200% in posts on known child sex abuse forums that link to downloadable images and videos hosted on the clearnet⁴.
 - In India, the India Child Protection Fund (ICPF) has registered a spike in online searches for CSAM since the beginning of lockdown in India, which we assess is an indicator of offenders migrating online⁵.
 - The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) has registered a 106% increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation - rising from 983,734 reports in March 2019 to 2,027,520 in the very same month in 2020⁶.
 - The UK's National Crime Agency (NCA)'s analysis of online chats shows that offenders are discussing new opportunities to exploit children during lockdown⁷.
 - According to an April Europol report, criminals have quickly adapted their modus operandi to the new circumstances, which has led to a surge in the number of offenders trying to contact young people on social media, an increasing number of connections from which child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has been downloaded over peer-to-peer file sharing networks and, in some states like Spain, a substantial

² 'Global Threat Assessment' (WePROTECT Global Alliance, 11 December 2019), accessible at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5630f48de4b00a75476ecf0a/t/5deecb0fc4c5ef23016423cf/1575930642519/FINAL+-+Global+Threat+Assessment.pdf>.

³ M. Stroebel (Thorn), Personal Communication, April 20th, 2020.

⁴ 'Online Child Abuse Flourishes As Investigators Struggle With Workload During Pandemic', accessible at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/online-child-exploitation-flourishes-investigators-struggle/> (accessed 28th April 2020).

⁵ 'Report: Demand For Child Sexual Abuse Material In India' (India Child Protection Fund, April 2020), available at <https://www.icpf.org.in/reports> (accessed 12th May 2020).

⁶ 'Child Exploitation Complaints Rise 106% To Hit 2 Million In Just One Month: Is COVID-19 To Blame?', accessible at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#6837e89a4c9c> (accessed 30th April 2020).

⁷ 'Law Enforcement In Coronavirus Online Safety Push As National Crime Agency Reveals 300,000 In UK Pose Sexual Threat To Children', accessible at <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/onlinesafetyathome> (accessed 26th April 2020).

increase in the number of complaints submitted by the public to hotlines and law enforcement institutions⁸.

- Hotlines and portals are registering an increase in reporting. For instance, ECPAT Sweden has signaled a clear increase in reports of online child sexual abuse to several of their hotlines⁹. INHOPE has stated that reports of child sexual exploitation activity to cybertip hotlines are up by an average of 30% globally¹⁰; British charity Barnardos has identified a new trend of children aged 12-13 years unexpectedly coerced in online settings¹¹.
- Pornhub has reported that there has been an exponential increase in the viewing of adult pornography, assessed by Marie Collins Foundation (MCF) to indicate a likely similarly exponential rise in viewing of CSAM¹².

KEY RISK FACTORS FOR CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

3. The impact of the Coronavirus lockdown has caused both children and those seeking to offend to spend more time online. We assess the following to be key areas of risk:
 - **Higher level of emotional vulnerability:**
 - Research from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has shown how abusers will often target children who have shown vulnerability online¹³. At the end of March 2020, NSPCC's counselling service Childline had already delivered more than 900 sessions to children worried about COVID-19¹⁴ and, according to recent figures released by the Children's

⁸ 'Catching The Virus Cybercrime, Disinformation And The Covid-19 Pandemic' (Europol, 3 April 2020, pg. 7 - 8), accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed 29th April 2020).

⁹ 'Why Children Are At Risk of Sexual Exploitation During COVID-19' (ECPAT International, 7 April 2020), accessible at <https://www.ecpat.org/news/covid-19-sexual-abuse/>.

¹⁰ 'Child Sexual Abuse Images and Online Exploitation Surge During Pandemic', accessible at <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/child-sexual-abuse-images-online-exploitation-surge-during-pandemic-n1190506> (accessed 28th April 2020).

¹¹ 'Voluntary Sector Sitrep Update Call With CC Bailey – Changing Nature Of Vulnerability Threat 30.04.2020' (National Police Chiefs' Council NPCC, April 2020).

¹² Marie Collins Foundation correspondence with WePROTECT Global Alliance (April 2020).

¹³ 'Lonely Children Are Twice As Likely To Be Groomed Online' (NSPCC, 23rd April 2020), accessible at <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/coronavirus-children-groomed-online/>.

¹⁴ 'Coronavirus: Children With Mental Health Issues More Likely To Be 'Adversely Affected' By Lockdown, Says Psychiatrist', accessible at <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/coronavirus-lockdown-uk-children-mental-health-anxiety-eating-disorder-a9473486.html> (accessed 4th May 2020).

- Commissioner for England, 88% of children interviewed in March indicated they felt extremely stressed¹⁵.
- Moreover, a recent survey by Young Minds found that 83% of children with a history of mental health needs felt the pandemic had made their mental health a bit or even much worse¹⁶. UNICEF has reported increasing numbers of children worried about being isolated from family and friends and catching or even dying from the virus¹⁷. The Australian eSafety Commissioner has seen a notable increase in stress, worry and self-harm indicators in child cyberbullying complaints¹⁸.
 - It is therefore very likely that the numbers of emotionally vulnerable children groomed online will grow. Despite not linking the phenomenon strictly to mental vulnerability, Europol has also noted that a higher number of children maybe more inclined towards self-production of CSAM to exchange with their own peers or, depending on various factors, even to send to adults¹⁹.
 - **Lack of caregiver supervision:** COVID-19 lockdown has meant that millions of people worldwide are now based primarily at home. As of 3 April 2020, school closures due to COVID-19 were impacting more than 90% of the world's school population²⁰ affecting more than 1.5 billion children and young people²¹. With parents balancing childcare and homeschooling with other responsibilities, children are likely to be exposed to more unsupervised screen time and therefore to more risks of sexual exploitation online.
 - Research conducted by SafeToNet over the period 24 February to 12 April 2020 indicated that children are indeed exposed to longer screen time, which may very well be linked to an increasing lack of child supervision with parents now working from home²². Unsupervised internet access will increasingly expose children to grooming and manipulation by offenders through online

¹⁵ "Angry, Fed Up, Isolated": Coronavirus And Children's Mental Health', accessible at <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/03/angry-fed-up-isolated-coronavirus-and-childrens-mental-health/> (accessed 4th May 2020).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ 'COVID-19 Is Hurting Children's Mental Health. Here Are 3 Ways We Can Help', accessible at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-is-hurting-childrens-mental-health/> (accessed 11th May 2020).

¹⁸ J.I. Grant (Australian eSafety Commissioner) correspondence with WePROTECT Global Alliance, May 2020.

¹⁹ Europol, *op. cit.*, pg. 9.

²⁰ 'COVID-19 And Its Implications For Protecting Children Online' (UNICEF et Partners, April 2020), accessible at <https://www.unicef.org/documents/covid-19-and-implications-protecting-children-online>.

²¹ 'Children At Increased Risk Of Harm Online During Global COVID-19 Pandemic', (UNICEF, April 2020), accessible at <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-increased-risk-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic>.

²² 'Weekly Reporting: Risk Message & Behaviour Analytics 24/02/2020 - 12/02/2020' (SafeToNet, 14th April 2020).

gaming and the use of chat groups as well as live streaming and video chat services.

- The lack of age verification on most social media sites, along with peer pressure and access to parents' or siblings' devices, may introduce younger children to adult-focused services and platforms, increasing their exposure to offenders.

OFFENDERS ATTITUDES

4. We judge that offenders will seek to exploit the COVID-19 lockdown to carry out abuse online. Although it is difficult at this stage to assess exact variations and changes in the offenders patterns of behaviour, some early qualitative evidence has started to emerge:
 - **Impact of stress variation factors:** Offenders are usually more likely to offend when their lifestyle is affected by a significant change²³. In addition, there is operational evidence that many of the members of online websites and forums displaying CSAM do not have significant social support outside these platforms. Therefore, we assess that confinement due to COVID-19 could represent the trigger factor that will lead more offenders to increase or initiate illegal activity online. Recent data from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation show that in the two weeks after lockdown started in the UK there has been a 41% increase in users of the “Get Help” section of their Stop It Now! website (created for those with concerns about their own sexual behaviour towards children), with a total percentage of new users rising from 26% prior to 64% after lockdown²⁴.
 - **Grooming ahead of planned travel:** According to ECPAT, some offenders are likely to use the opportunity given by COVID-19 confinement to groom children online today with the prospect of visiting them to carry out abuse once travel restrictions have been eased²⁵.
 - **Potential for increase in live streaming:** As a significant amount of CSE live streaming is usually done from home environments (96% of live streamed abuse investigated by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) showed a child on their own, in a home environment²⁶) and often involves the victim's parents, it is highly likely this form of offending will increase due to COVID-19 restrictions. Furthermore, economic

²³ A. Burrows (NSPCC), Personal Communication, April 27th, 2020.

²⁴ 'Impact Of The Coronavirus On Stop It Now Websites' (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, April 2020), D. Findlater correspondence with WePROTECT Global Alliance, May 2020.

²⁵ ECPAT, *op. cit.*

²⁶ 'Live Streaming: What Professionals Need To Know', accessible at <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/our-views/live-streaming-what-professionals-need-to-know/> (accessed 4th May 2020).

hardship due to COVID-19 will exacerbate the economic factors driving CSE, especially in impoverished areas²⁷.

- **Traffic on the dark web:** Recent data from Europol not only confirms that CSAM continues to be distributed via dark web platforms, but also suggests that there has been an increase in activity here since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic²⁸. Moreover, operational evidence²⁹ shows an increasing number of conversations between offenders sharing their excitement over the additional time they now have to share and access CSAM content during lockdown.

IMPACT ON RESPONSE MEASURES

5. In addition to the difficulties in reporting encountered by those children who are now trapped with their offenders³⁰, isolation measures have also increased the difficulties in processing reports of online abuse, creating a secondary impact. The IWF has registered an 89% reduction in the number of URLs taken down after being identified as showing child sexual abuse between 16 March 2020 and 15 April 2020 in comparison to the previous month. Many tech companies and law enforcement units are now obliged to work remotely, which means less access to the tools they would need to take down the material quickly and effectively³¹. As hotlines are forced to reduce their human moderators, content remains live for longer. Existing artificial intelligence (AI) based systems are being placed under unprecedented stress, having been designed to operate with greater human oversight.
6. In many countries, law enforcement personnel have been diverted from cybercrime offences to supporting lockdown measurements, ultimately generating further disruption in the service to counteract OCSE. An April report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) also stated that in several States, investigative and judicial procedures are disrupted by the need to conduct these type of activities in person, which is not currently possible³².

²⁷ Interpol correspondence with WePROTECT Global Alliance, April 2020.

²⁸ Europol, *op. cit.*, pg. 10.

²⁹ Law enforcement correspondence with WePROTECT Global Alliance, April 2020

³⁰ 'Statement By The Lanzarote Committee Chair And Vice-Chairperson On Stepping Up Protection Of Children Against Sexual Exploitation And Abuse In Times Of The COVID-19 Pandemic' (Council of Europe, 2020), accessible at <https://rm.coe.int/covid-19-lc-statement-en-final/16809e17ae>.

³¹ 'Lockdown Hampering Removal Of Child Sexual Abuse Material Online', accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/27/lockdown-hampering-removal-of-child-sexual-abuse-material-online> (accessed 29th April 2020).

³² 'Cybercrime And Covid19: Risks and Responses' (UNODC, April 2020).

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER ACTION

7. The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children (EVAC) has provided [resources](#)³³ to provide support during the COVID-19 pandemic, including advice for parents, care-givers, educators and children. Material focused specifically on online harms includes a [public safety campaign](#)³⁴ from a range of major tech companies (including Microsoft, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Roblox and Snapchat).
8. Australia's eSafety Commissioner has also developed a series of resources and tools to keep children safe online during COVID-19 isolation. Visit their [website](#) for online safety kits, tips for caregivers, and more, including a guide for parents across the world.
9. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation continues now more than ever its work aimed at offering prevention help to those who may be concerned about their own sexual behaviour or of their loved ones. Visit their [Stop It Now!](#) website to access their "Get Help" section offering self-help resources as well as advice for family members, parents, carers and professionals.

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³³'Protecting Children During The COVID-19 Outbreak' (EVAC), accessible at <https://www.end-violence.org/protecting-children-during-covid-19-outbreak>.

³⁴'Stay Safe At Home, Stay Safe Online' (EVAC, 17th April 2020), accessible at <https://www.end-violence.org/safeonlinecovid>