



The Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce of the Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Kids Online During COVID: Child Safety in an Increasingly Digital Age”

Written Statement of The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

I. Background on NCMEC and Its Programs to Combat Online Child Sexual Exploitation

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) is a private, non-profit organization created as a grassroots response to an unthinkable tragedy. In 1981, 6-year-old Adam Walsh was with his mother in a Florida shopping mall when he vanished without a trace. The search for Adam revealed many inadequacies that plagued missing children investigations at the time. There was no coordinated response to search for Adam, no AMBER Alert system to quickly deliver critical information to the public, and no place for families to go for guidance or emotional support.

Revé and John endured 10 excruciating days searching for Adam before he was found murdered 100 miles away. The Walshes channeled their grief and came together with other child advocates to create NCMEC in 1984. Over the past 37 years, NCMEC has grown to become the leading nonprofit organization and the nation’s congressionally designated clearinghouse on missing and exploited children issues. Today NCMEC has more than 370 employees who work to prevent child abduction, recover missing children, and combat child sexual victimization through five main programs of work relating to: (1) missing children; (2) exploited children; (3) community outreach; (4) training and education; and (5) family resources.

A. NCMEC’s CyberTipline

As the Internet became more accessible to the general public in the 1990s, NCMEC started to see a growing threat to children being sexually exploited, enticed, and groomed into abusive situations by online predators. In 1998, in response to this trend NCMEC created the CyberTipline to serve as the online mechanism for members of the public and electronic service providers to report incidents of child sexual exploitation, including: child sex trafficking; online enticement of children for sexual acts; child sexual molestation; child pornography¹; child sex tourism; unsolicited obscene materials sent to children; misleading domain names; and misleading words or digital images. NCMEC’s two primary goals in running the CyberTipline are: (1) to prioritize reports indicating imminent danger to a child; and (2) to determine where the reported incident is occurring so a report can be made available to the appropriate law enforcement agency for its independent review. Today the CyberTipline is a key tool in helping ESPs; members of the public; international, federal, state, and local law enforcement; and prosecutors to combat online child sexual exploitation.

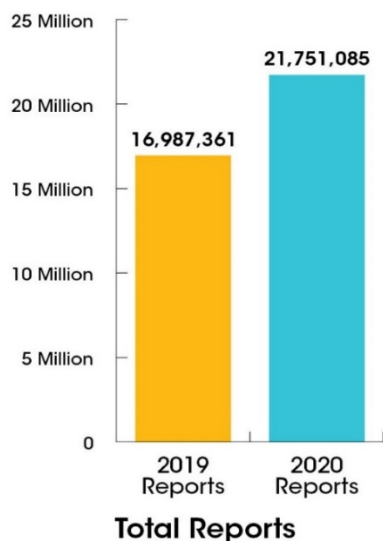
¹ The term “child pornography” is used in NCMEC’s CyberTipline reports because this is the term designated by U.S. federal, and most state, laws. Outside of this legal context, NCMEC refers to these images and videos as “child sexual abuse material” to most accurately reflect what is depicted – the rape, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation of children.

To date, NCMEC has received over 87 million CyberTipline reports, and the volume of content reported to the CyberTipline continues to increase. In 2019, NCMEC received over 16.9 million reports. In 2020, NCMEC received more than 21.7 million reports containing 65.4 million images, videos and related contents, with the COVID pandemic being a significant factor in last year's increase in cases.

II. Impacts of COVID-19 on Online Child Sexual Exploitation

Beginning in March 2020, when COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were first put into place nationwide and in many countries around the world, NCMEC witnessed explosive increases in the number of reports submitted to the CyberTipline. For the first three months of the pandemic (March, April, and May 2020), the number of reports submitted to NCMEC's CyberTipline increased by 106%, 308%, and 126%, respectively, compared to the number of reports submitted to the CyberTipline for the same months in 2019. Overall, reports to NCMEC's CyberTipline increased by 28% from 2019 to 2020.

CyberTipline Reports in 2019 Compared to 2020



Based on NCMEC's analysis to date, there are several factors specific to the COVID pandemic that fueled this increase in CyberTipline reports in 2020:

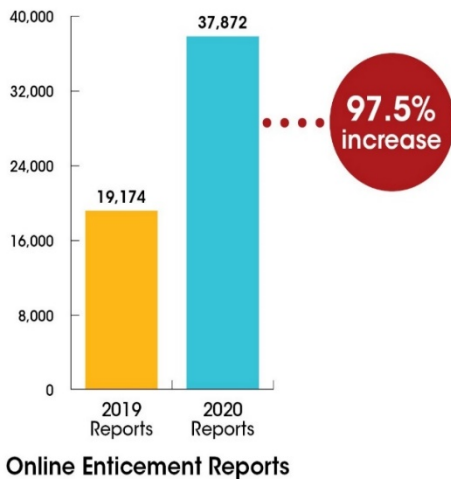
- Children and adults have been spending more time at home and online due to school closures, cancellation of social activities, and general social distancing measures.
- Children have been online without adequate levels of prevention and safety education and, in many instances, with less supervision and monitoring than in pre-COVID times.
- Offenders on the dark web have openly discussed taking advantage of social distancing measures to entice and lure children into producing sexually explicit material.
- A general increase in online activity has heightened circulation of "viral videos" where members of the public share child sexual abuse images out of outrage and to try to help identify and rescue a child victim.

While the majority of reports submitted to the CyberTipline involve the distribution of child sexual abuse material, NCMEC has witnessed alarming increases in offenders using social media and chat platforms to engage in the

online enticement of children for sexual activity. Online enticement occurs on any online platform and app that an offender can use to lure a child to share sexually explicit images, meet in person for sexual purposes, engage the child in sexual conversation or role-playing, compel the child to engage in sexually explicit conduct alone or with another child via live-streaming, or, in some instances, sell or trade the child’s sexual images to others.

The number of enticement-related reports submitted to NCMEC’s CyberTipline increased by 97.5% from 2019 to 2020, as shown below. For the first three months of the pandemic (March, April, and May 2020), the number of online enticement reports submitted to NCMEC’s CyberTipline increased by 62%, 108%, and 163%, respectively, compared to the numbers submitted to the CyberTipline for the same months in 2019. While the report totals are small with respect to the total CyberTipline report volumes, these increases highlight the immediate impact of COVID-19 on this particular crime:

CyberTipline Reports Relating to Online Child Sexual Enticement in 2019 Compared to 2020



There are multiple reasons why reports of online enticement increased so dramatically in 2020, but one of the most evident is that safety precautions adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic moved both children’s and adults’ lives online more than ever before. Many children switched to virtual learning and have spent more time on social media or online gaming in lieu of seeing friends or meeting new people in person. This left children and teenagers more susceptible to the dangers of the internet.

While the correlation between the increase in reports of child sexual exploitation and the COVID-19 pandemic remains fluid and continues to evolve, one especially alarming development has been a marked increase in offenders actively discussing on the dark web how to entice children who are spending more time online without adult supervision. Examples of these discussions are provided below:

“Speaking of corona...I hope you guys are developing some online lesson plans for all the cute boys stuck at home. They are in dire need of structured learning activities.”

“... but with all those young girls stuck at home there must be a lot of camming going on now... hopefully some nice self-productions wll show up ;)”

“hello fellow pedos, think of all those young boys stuck at home in their bedroom with nothing to do but explore their bodies..”

“I’ve been wondering, with hundreds of millions of boys stuck at home, does that mean that capping/finding boys has become much easier?”

“BTW I don’t know if you notice, but due to coronavirus and closed schools, it’s like during the summer break. Very easy for find kids in social media.”

III. NCMEC’s Efforts to Prevent and Disrupt the Impact of COVID-19 on Online Child Sexual Exploitation

Prevention education and awareness is especially essential in unpredictable times, such as the COVID pandemic, when there are increased threats to child safety online. In response to the growing number of reports relating to online child sexual exploitation, NCMEC has been diligently promoting and expanding its child safety prevention education for children, their families, and child-serving professionals. NCMEC provides free-of-charge, age-appropriate safety and prevention resources focusing on the topics of online and real-world safety, including abduction and child sexual exploitation prevention.

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, NCMEC has produced a series of blogs and related educational materials addressing our child safety response and resources to the COVID-19 situation. We also have used our social media platforms to engage with the public and our national safety partners on child safety issues and to provide enhanced educational resources for parents/guardians, many of whom are managing their children’s online education and activities in more intensive ways during the COVID-19 stay-at-home timeframe. NCMEC’s education messaging has focused on general safety awareness as well as education on how to handle suspected child sexual abuse material online.

IV. Conclusion

Offenders have seized on the opportunity created by COVID pandemic to exploit and entice children for sexual activity. These offenders have moved inside the safety of our own homes via the Internet to seek children to victimize. This alarming trend has underscored the urgency for NCMEC to promote our educational programs on online child safety both for children and their parents. NCMEC continues to closely monitor and assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on online child sexual exploitation, while providing expanded services to address the needs of vulnerable children, their families and child-serving professionals. Through this time of national crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond, NCMEC will continue to carry on its mission to prevent and disrupt online child sexual exploitation.