

EXPLOITING ISOLATION: SEXUAL PREDATORS INCREASINGLY TARGETING CHILDREN DURING COVID PANDEMIC

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[Press Release](#)

A further increase in sharing of child abuse material online, sexual coercion and extortion of children is expected



Video calls with friends and family, social media interaction, online games, educational use: during the corona lockdown children's lives promptly shifted even further from the real world into an online virtual one. Sex offenders have found in this development a tempting opportunity to access a broader group of potential victims. [The report published today by Europol](#) shines a light on the increased sharing of child sexual exploitation images online and how to confront this serious threat to children's safety.

To confront this threat, law enforcement has also increased its efforts to tackle this severe crime, which sees a child being re-victimised every time an image is shared.

EXCHANGE OF ABUSE MATERIAL IN SHARP INCREASE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

With both children and sexual offenders confined at home, law enforcement authorities have seen in the past few months the amount of child sexual exploitation material shared online increasing globally. Sex offenders have increased their criminal activities in social media, via peer-to-peer networks and on the darkweb. Attempts to access websites featuring child sexual abuse material, calls to helplines and activities in dark net and surface web chats sharing child abuse material have all increased during the confinement period. In some countries, more sexual abuse offences, such as online solicitation and sextortion, have also been reported.

OFFENDERS HUNTING FOR SELF-GENERATED CONTENT

Webcam videos have considerably increased in offenders' forums. This includes videos depicting forced or coerced children, videos produced by children for peers or for social media attention or others which were captured without their knowledge. Video "competitions" organised in child sexual exploitation web forums may have also influenced the increase of exchanged images. The monitoring of these forums shows that abusers were quick to realise the enhanced vulnerability of children being more online. On these forums, offenders exchange not only abuse material, but also "best practices" on how to trick and coerce more victims.

THE COVID-19 EFFECT ON CHILDREN'S SAFETY

Although the exchange of child abuse material is usually not motivated by financial gains, offenders pay for some forms of it, such as live distant child abuse. Through livestreaming, offenders unable to travel due, for example, to corona restrictions can have children abused at their request. Child abuse material content can also be disguised behind advertisements bringing criminals profits with a "pay per click" formula. The economic slow-down related to the pandemic may stimulate an increase of child abuse material produced within vulnerable communities for economic gain. With more offenders online, the exchange of abuse material may continue to increase and new victims, abused during the confinement, are yet to be identified.

EDUCATE CHILDREN AND PREVENT THE CRIME

Europol is monitoring the threat and providing continuous support to Member States to identify offenders and victims. With its "[Trace an object](#)" campaign, Europol has involved the public in providing leads for the identification of victims and offenders. The Europe wide [#SayNo](#) campaign brings awareness to children on the dangers they face sharing explicit material online. As previously reported by Europol, self-generated explicit material represents a significant threat to children's safety. Society, including law enforcement, needs to focus even more on educating children and prevent them from becoming victims at the first place. [Resources](#) are available for individuals with a sexual interest in children to help them divert their behaviour from becoming a destructive reality.

How to act and prevent? See [Staying Safe During Covid-19: What You Need To Know](#)

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Europol's Executive Director Catherine De Bolle said, "The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a surge in online distribution of child sexual abuse material, which was already at high levels prior to the pandemic. The harm resulting from being a victim of this crime is severe, and every time a picture or video is shared, this results in repeat victimisation. The impact of this crime area can hardly be overstated and an effective response is of utmost importance."

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CRIME AREAS

[Cybercrime](#) • [Child Sexual Exploitation](#)

TARGET GROUPS

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