

Online child sexual exploitation during a lockdown

Somaya Alwejdani & Richard Wortley
Jill Dando Institute
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The problem

Online child sexual exploitation (CSE) involves interaction via the Internet between an adult and child, designed to get the child to engage in sexual activities. It may involve grooming, in which the adult seeks to gain the confidence of the child and prepare him/her for sexual exploitation, or the use of trickery, threats and blackmail to coerce the child to comply with sexual requests.

What we know about online CSE and how we know it

Online CSE is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the term 'online grooming' first used in the early 2000s. The growth of the Internet and the extent to which it has been exploited for deviant sexual purposes, are astonishing. The Internet has not simply provided an alternative platform for sexual offenders who would have offended anyway; it has created a pool of new offenders. It allows individuals with even a casual interest in sexual offending to satisfy their sexual curiosities and desires immediately, from the comfort of their own home, and relatively risk free. As one leading researcher has observed, there are few other crimes where an individual can become an offender with such 'extraordinary ease'.

Teenagers are estimated to spend on average more than 20 hours a week on online social networks (OSN). Studies suggest that between 20-32% of Internet users under the age of 18 have received online sexual solicitations. Most victims are above the age of 13 and girls are targeted more often than boys (a ratio of two to one). The most common sites for this to occur are Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Tik Tok.

Studies indicate that groomers come from heterogeneous demographic backgrounds and have few distinguishing features. They are predominantly male and most commonly white. The common stereotype is of offenders who are considerably older than their victims and who lie about their age as part of their grooming strategy. However a number of studies have challenged this stereotype, finding that many groomers are in their twenties and make few efforts to disguise their age. Victims may be aware of the groomer's sexual intentions and initially engage in the interaction because they are lonely, are going through some emotional turmoil, or are flattered by the attention.

Policing online CES often involves investigators posing as children online and engaging with potential offenders in order to collect evidence on which to make an arrest. Effective as this strategy may be, it is resource intensive and can at best be applied to a relatively small number offenders. The reality is that most offenders and victims will not come to the notice of authorities, through low reporting and detection rates, coupled with the sheer volume of cases. In the light of this reality, we must turn to prevention strategies that make offending riskier, more difficult, and less rewarding.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

It is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will increase opportunities for online CSE in three ways. First, it is likely that children will spend more time online thus exposing them to greater risk. Second, potential offenders will have more time on their hands to engage in online CSE. Third, OSNs face challenges to maintain security of the platforms due to increased demand and reduced staffing levels.

Some ideas in response

Any form of victimisation requires three elements: a victim, a perpetrator, and a safe location for the victimisation to occur. These three elements provide the targets for prevention strategies. In the case of online CSE we can 1) protect vulnerable children, 2) deflect or control potential offenders, and 2) make the Internet a more difficult and risky 'location' in which to offend.

1. Victim focussed

Children need to be taught safe online behaviours, while parents and caregivers have a responsibility to provide appropriate supervision of their children's online activities. Specific strategies include:

- Installing parental control software
- Ensuring privacy settings on social media platforms are turned to strictest setting
- Disabling video and audio communications on children's accounts
- Limiting details in the child's online profile and in their online communications– e.g., use an avatar instead of a photograph, avoid disclosing personal information such as age and location
- Setting clear rules about where and when online activities occur – e.g., using computers in communal areas, limits on the amount of screen time
- Accepting friend requests only from people who are actually known

2. Offender focussed

Many offenders lead otherwise conventional lives and must attempt to hide their deviant online activities from partners, family, friends and colleagues. Many also find their own online behaviour worrisome and may be open to receiving help to control it. If people have concerns about the online behaviour of someone they know, or if someone is concerned about their own thoughts and behaviour, confidential support and help is available via services such as Stop it Now (<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>).

3. Internet focussed

OSNs have a crucial role to play in making it more difficult for CSE to occur on their platforms and responding quickly and effectively if transgressions do occur. Specific strategies include:

- Increasing surveillance of online activity, e.g., algorithms to routinely detect suspicious accounts based on evidence-based 'red flags'
- Expanding reporting options for grooming behaviours to allow concerned followers to report inappropriate contacts and interactions
- Requiring age verification for setting up accounts, and requiring parental or guardian approval for setting up underage accounts
- Restricting the option for adults to search for and connect with underage individuals, and if necessary blocking transgressors from the platform
- Messaging that reminds users that contacting children for sexual purposes is illegal.

Relevant resources

E-Safety Commissioner: Tips for staying safe online during COVID-19 pandemic
<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/COVID-19>

UNICEF: Keeping children safe online during COVID-19 pandemic
<https://www.unicef.org/laos/stories/keeping-children-safe-online-during-COVID-19-pandemic>

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>