
PRESS RELEASE**Under Embargo until 19 October, 2021**

New report shows the scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse online is increasing, calling for a stronger collective global response

- The 2021 Global Threat Assessment report by WeProtect Global Alliance calls for a step change in the global response to the issue
- COVID-19 has contributed to a significant spike in child sexual exploitation and abuse online
- 1 in 3 respondents (34%) to global Economist Impact survey were asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with during childhood
- Study shows LGBTQ+ children amongst those more likely to experience sexual harm online
- Despite the concerning findings, there is hope that advances in online safety technology and increased government engagement can help to turn the tide on the global crisis.

WeProtect Global Alliance, a global movement of more than 200 governments, private sector companies and civil society organisations working together to transform the global response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online, has today published its 2021 Global Threat Assessment.

Its findings show that the scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse online is increasing at such a rapid rate that a step change is urgently required in the global response to create safe online environments for children.

It shows that in the past two years the reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse online has reached its highest levels with the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) processing 60,000 reports of child sexual abuse online every day.

The COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably one contributory factor behind the spike in reported incidents. The rise in child 'self-generated' sexual material is another trend that challenges the existing response with the Internet Watch Foundation observing a 77% increase in child 'self-generated' sexual material from 2019 to 2020.

Iain Drennan, Executive Director of WeProtect Global Alliance, says:

"The internet has become central to children's lives across the world, even more so as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past two years, we have observed an increase in the scale and complexity of child sexual abuse online. This report should act as a wake-up call to us all; together we must step up the global response and create a safer digital world for all children."

The 2021 Global Threat Assessment report details the scale and scope of the threat of child sexual exploitation online and aims to encourage action on the issue to reduce the risk to children and prevent abuse before it happens.

The three main insights of the report are:

1. The scale and complexity of child sexual exploitation and abuse is increasing and is outstripping the global capacity to respond.
2. Prevention needs to be prioritised. While a strong law enforcement and judicial response is essential, a truly sustainable strategy must include active prevention of abuse. There is a need to ensure the creation of safe online environments where children can thrive.
3. To tackle this complex, global issue, everyone with a role to protect children online needs to work together to dramatically improve the response. There is reason to be hopeful with child sexual exploitation and abuse moving up the global agenda, online safety technology becoming more accessible and advanced, and governments doing more to act.

As part of the report, a global study of childhood experiences of more than 5,000 young adults (aged 18 to 20) across 54 countries was completed by Economist Impact. More than a third of respondents (34%) had been asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with during their childhood.

Also included in the report was a survey of technology companies that showed most are using tools to detect child sexual abuse material (87% use image ‘hash-matching’), but only 37% currently use tools to detect online grooming.

WeProtect Global Alliance’s Global Strategic Response (GSR) provides a global strategy to eliminate child sexual exploitation and abuse, calling for greater voluntary cooperation, transparency, and implementation of online safety technologies, greater regulation to make online environments safer for children, and an increased investment in law enforcement.

The Economist Impact survey also demonstrated that girls, and respondents who identified as transgender/non-binary, LGBTQ+ and/or disabled, were more likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood:

- Overall, 57% of female and 48% of male respondents reported at least one online sexual harm
- 59% of respondents who identified as transgender/non-binary experienced an online sexual harm, compared to 47% of cisgender respondents
- 65% of respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ experienced an online sexual harm, compared to 46% non-LGBTQ+
- 57% of disabled respondents experienced an online sexual harm, compared to 48% of non-disabled respondents

Supporting quotes

Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite Jr., US Department Of Justice’s Criminal Division

“The U.S. Department of Justice commends the WeProtect Global Alliance’s mission to bring together the global community under one banner to fight online child sexual exploitation. The Global Threat Assessment reveals with clarity the degree to which online child sexual exploitation affects the childhood of far too many. The U.S. Department of Justice will answer the moral calling demanded by this report through its continued commitment to the Alliance, obtaining justice for victims, and holding offenders accountable.”

Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs

“The 2021 Global Threat Assessment is a call for action to tackle one of the worst crimes. Child sexual abuse can harm for life, we urgently need to do more to protect our children. Regulation can help facilitate not only prevention but also action by all the relevant stakeholders, in particular tech companies. Law enforcement must be provided with adequate human and technical resources to face the increasing case workload. We can solve this problem if we work together globally to prevent and respond to these crimes.”

Julie Inman Grant, Australia’s eSafety Commissioner

“These report findings sadly further demonstrate why collaborative efforts to protect Australian children have never been more important. We believe it takes a network to disrupt a network and are proud to see a growing network of experts across Australia, across the world, coming together to improve safety practices and address the issue in new ways.”

Lt Col Dana Humaid, Director General of the International Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Interior of the United Arab Emirates

“We consider the launch of the Global Threat Assessment report 2021 as an opportunity to reflect and prioritize efforts and engage with the international community and share our experiences and practices. This report can be used by governments to guide their efforts. The challenge of sexual exploitation and abuse online is a crime of global magnitude and requires collaborative and multi-disciplinary efforts to combat and end it.”

UK Government Safeguarding Minister Rachel Maclean

“Child sexual abuse is a heinous crime that crosses borders, so it is vital that we work with our global allies to tackle it. Through international cooperation with law enforcement, civil society, and industry partners we can ensure that there is no safe space for sex offenders to operate. The latest Global Threat Assessment provides valuable insights that can help sharpen our international response, and I look forward to further co-operation with the We Protect Global Alliance to make sure that children are protected online.”

Ernie Allen, WeProtect Global Alliance Chair

“The problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online is massive and growing, we must do more to identify those preying upon the world’s children online, but we must also bring far greater attention to prevention. We can stop these crimes before they occur. Our goal is to awaken world leaders and place this crisis far higher on the global policy agenda.”

Julie Cordua, CEO of Thorn

“Just as technology is constantly evolving, so are the methods of those who seek to sexually abuse and exploit children online. WeProtect’s report shows that emerging technologies, such as live-streaming, are increasingly being used for exploitation. We must come together to develop an actionable, holistic response that keeps pace with technology. Together, we will turn the tide on this epidemic.”

Sean Litton, Executive Director, Technology Coalition

“The technology industry continues to make progress in advancing its methods to detect and report Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) content. We remain encouraged by the industry’s knowledge sharing and collaboration in creating the critical tools to propel the global threat response forward. The collective action we are seeing is testament to both the seriousness with which the technology industry takes this problem, and their commitment to its resolution.”

Baroness Joanna Shields, CEO of Benevolent AI and Board Member and Management Board Member of WeProtect Global Alliance

“With 60,000 reports of online child sexual abuse being processed every day, inaction or indifference is not an option. Each report represents a childhood irrevocably damaged. We need to push online child sexual abuse to the top of global policy and law enforcement agendas and have coordinated and effective global action to ensure that kids are safe online.”

Cornelius Williams, Director, Child Protection Programme Team, UNICEF

“It is clear that technology is dramatically changing the nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse online around the world, including across the African continent. No country is immune. Offenders have new ways to access and abuse children. It’s crucial that countries invest in systems and services for child protection to prevent abuse from occurring in the first place. This takes a coordinated effort within each country and across the globe.”

Guillermo Galarza, Vice President of the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC)

“The global assessment report will give us an overview of the situation during COVID-19 and online sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. 2020 was a year where more than 21.7 million reports reached NCMEC. Particularly in the cases of online seduction on social platforms, video games and message applications, where there was an increase of 97.5 percent given that children and adolescents spend all their time on these platforms due to confinement caused by the pandemic.”

Laís Cardoso Peretto, Executive Director of Childhood Brasil

“In the first year of the pandemic, the number of anonymous reports from websites containing images and videos of child sexual abuse more than doubled in Brazil compared to 2019, reaching a record level in the historical series started in 2006 by the SaferNet Brasil platform. Now in 2021, between January and April, we registered a 33% increase in complaints compared to the same period last year. The arrival of 5G technology tends to aggravate this scenario. It is necessary for everyone to mobilize in this confrontation.”

John Tanagho, Executive Director at IJM's Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children

“The Global Threat Assessment reveals that livestreamed child sexual abuse for payment is increasing, with demand-side offenders unable to travel turning to livestreamed abuse. This is a reminder that greater global and national collaboration is needed to protect children through sustained whole-of-society approaches, including more effective and resourced justice systems. The inspiring story of Filipino survivor leader and recent Women of the Future Southeast Asia awardee, Ruby, featured in the GTA (p. 61), provides hope that effective justice system responses and international collaboration lead to victim rescue, survivor restoration, and ultimately prevention of new abuse.”

Tarang Khurana, Chair - Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)'s Young Indians' Project Masoom

“There is enough evidence to infer that lockdowns and disruptions caused due to COVID-19 have significantly contributed to the spike in online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The easy access to abusive content involving children is deeply concerning. The universality of the problem requires collaborative action and we all have a shared responsibility to end this. Along with strong law enforcement it is imperative to create empowered individuals, society, and community, who come together to uproot this systemic menace”

To download the full report please visit here <https://bit.ly/GlobalThreatAssessment21>

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Media enquiries

Marianna Scamballi, Account Director, International Client Hub
Action Global Communications
+357 22 818 884 / +357 99 245 752
marianna.s@actionprgroup.com

Jess Lishak, Head of Communications and Engagement
WeProtect Global Alliance
+44 (0) 7981 956079
jess@weprotectga.org

Notes to Editors

WeProtect Global Alliance

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The Alliance generates political commitment and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.

In 2020, WeProtect Global Alliance relaunched as an independent organisation and is the combination of two initiatives:

- The European Commission and US Department of Justice's Global Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Online; and
- WePROTECT Children, established by the UK Government as a global multi-stakeholder response to combating online child sexual abuse.

The Alliance consists of 98 governments, 53 companies, 61 civil society organisation and 9 international organisations.

Learn more at: <https://www.weprotect.org/>

Global Threat Assessment Report 2021

The Global Threat Assessment Report 2021 published by the Alliance details the scale and scope of the threat of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. It aims to encourage evidence-based action by recognising the significant progress achieved to date, and highlighting opportunities to reduce the risk to children, to prevent abuse before it takes place.

This report is a meta study that distils findings from multiple international studies to increase their global reach, collate a holistic picture of the threat, and offer a balanced assessment where information is incomplete, or experts disagree (caveating where appropriate).

This secondary research is supported by various forms of primary research:

- Interviews with law enforcement officials, child safety advocates, academics, technology industry representatives and other experts.
- Case studies provided by member organisations and their affiliates.
- An anonymised survey of 32 global technology companies, which was conducted by the Alliance in collaboration with the Technology Coalition
- Intelligence ‘vignettes’ developed by Crisp, a leading provider of online safety technologies.

Economist Impact Survey

To help fill the global knowledge gap on the potential scale and scope of online sexual harms against children, Economist Impact and WeProtect Global Alliance conducted a study that gathered evidence from more than 5,000 18 to 20 year olds in 54 countries around the world who had regular access to the internet as children.

The questionnaire asked respondents about their exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors during childhood.

- i. Questions centred on four online sexual harms, defined as:
 - Being sent sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before they were 18.
 - Being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship with an adult they knew or someone they did not know before a secret.
 - Having sexually explicit images of them shared without consent (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).
 - Being asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).

Definition for ‘Child sexual exploitation and abuse online’

Child sexual exploitation and abuse that is partly or entirely facilitated by technology, i.e. the internet or other wireless communications.