

EXPLOITING ISOLATION: Offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a surge in online distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), 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 victimization. The impact of this crime area can hardly be overstated and an effective response is of utmost importance.

Online Child Sexual Abuse refers to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children via the internet. Whereas the sexual abuse or exploitation very much takes place in the physical world, the subsequent sharing of images and videos depicting this abuse significantly aggravates the impact of this crime on victims.

The amount of CSAM already online was staggering and it has continued to increase during the pandemic with statistics indicating that the amount of material has rapidly increased in some countries. While the number of young children accessing the internet has grown significantly over recent months, awareness of the potential risks remains low and cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation have increased significantly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, different measures have been introduced to prevent the spread of the corona-virus, including social distancing, confinement, and working and learning from home. Children have experienced confinement in the home bringing challenges for their safety online and offline. Those challenges potentially include social isolation, lack of peer and mentor support, increased time online, anxiety, stress and other mental health impacts.