

KNOW THE THREAT: ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION & ABUSE



DHS is a global leader in combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)—a crime committed when perpetrators use the Internet to exploit and abuse children sexually. A child may be coerced into a situation of sexual exploitation and abuse through physical force or threats. Children may also be persuaded to engage in such sexual activity because of more complex and nuanced factors, including a power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator.

DHS, via its law enforcement agencies and Components, is taking a comprehensive approach—not only responding to this growing crime, but also investing in prevention to truly disrupt and dismantle the criminal networks that exploit our children and youth. DHS has launched Know2Protect®, a national public awareness campaign to educate and empower children, teens, parents, trusted adults, and policymakers to prevent and combat online CSEA. Through in-person presentations and online tools and resources, DHS explains how to report these crimes and offer response and support resources for victims and survivors of online child sexual exploitation.

ONLINE CSEA CAN TAKE MANY FORMS, INCLUDING:

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)¹: Any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a person less than 18 years old.

Online Enticement and Coercion (Grooming)²: The sexual grooming process includes identifying a minor, establishing a connection by offering support and attention to the minor, befriending them, gaining their trust, gathering personal information about them, exploiting any vulnerabilities they may have, and lowering their inhibitions by talking, joking, and teaching a minor about sex.

Sextortion³: Occurs when offenders use threats or coercive tactics to cause victims to produce and send sexually explicit imagery of themselves.

Financial Sextortion⁴: Occurs when minors are coerced into sending explicit images online and extorted for money.

Livestreaming Child Sexual Exploitation⁵: Occurs when an offender compels a child victim to engage in sexually explicit conduct during a broadcast, in real time, to one or more viewers.

Generative Artificial Intelligence CSAM⁶: the production, through digital media, of child sexual abuse material and other wholly or partly artificially or digitally created sexualized images of children.

Online CSEA has turned into a global epidemic. With the advancement and dominance of digital technologies, criminal actors now have unprecedented access to children, and child sexual exploitation and abuse is escalating globally. Online CSEA is increasingly organized and worsened by the speed, scale, and scope of digital technologies. Increased technology use among children and teens has created space for these crimes to flourish.

Reports of online CSEA have increased exponentially to 32 million from 16.9 million in just the past three years, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)⁷. DHS is seeing a rapid rise of financial sextortion, specifically targeting teenage boys; the evolution and sophistication of perpetrators using grooming tactics; increased livestreaming sexual abuse of children; and emerging use of artificial intelligence to generate CSAM.

Online CSEA is the second largest crime set Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), DHS' principal investigative arm, investigates behind narcotics trafficking. Each year HSI initiates over 6,000 new investigative cases into child sexual exploitation and abuse. Last year, HSI identified and/or rescued over 1,100 child victims and arrested more than 4,400 individuals for crimes involving the sexual exploitation of children.

DHS Components develop digital forensic tools to identify victims, locate crime scenes, and bring perpetrators to justice. These tools have enabled HSI special agents to identify perpetrators in hours rather than weeks. They also preserve the well-being of HSI personnel on the front lines by reducing the exposure of horrific content from a manual review process to an automated process to identify victims.

DHS is incorporating a victim-centered approach into all Department programs, policies, and operations that involve victims of crime. DHS aims to minimize additional trauma for victims, mitigate undue penalization, and provide needed stability and support to victims.

¹ While the term “child pornography” is currently used in federal statutes, “child sexual abuse material” is preferred—as it better reflects the abuse that is depicted in the images/videos and the resulting trauma to the child. 2023 National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.

² 2023 National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.

³ 2023 National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.

⁴ HSI, federal partners issue national public safety alert on sextortion schemes | ICE

⁵ 2023 National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.

⁶ Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (“Luxembourg Guidelines”), issued 2016.

⁷ CyberTipline Data (missingkids.org)

RESOURCES TO STAY SAFE

- **Know2Protect: Together We Can Stop Online Child Exploitation™** know2protect.gov
- **Know2Protect:** Additional campaign resources dhs.gov/know2protect/campaign-resources
- **SchoolSafety.gov:** Resources to help educators, school leaders, parents, and school personnel identify, prevent, and respond to child exploitation. <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/child-exploitation>
- **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children:** <https://www.missingkids.org/theissues/sextortion>

REPORT SUSPECTED ONLINE CSEA

- If you suspect a child might be a victim of online sexual exploitation, call the DHS Know2Protect Tip Line at 1-833-591-KNOW (5669) and complete the online National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Cyber Tipline form at <https://report.cybertip.org/reporting>
- If you suspect a child has been abducted or faces imminent danger, call 911 or your local police immediately.