



INTERPOL



THREATS AND TRENDS CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

COVID-19 IMPACT



SEPTEMBER 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies, government and non-government organizations (NGOs) globally have expressed concerns regarding the impact COVID-19 isolation measures may have on crimes against children.¹ With the closure of schools and other support services, the likely increase in online time, and the confinement at home,² it is considered that children may be at an increased risk of sexual exploitation both online and offline.

This report presents an overview and analysis of what is known about how the COVID-19 pandemic is currently affecting the trends and threats of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) offences around the world. The report also highlights the trends and threats in the current COVID-19 context compared to pre-pandemic measures, what impact these are having in the short-term, and what changes we may see in the mid-term when COVID-19 measures are reduced.

This report was compiled using information from law enforcement, private entities, NGOs and open sources collected by the INTERPOL Vulnerable Communities Sub-directorate, Crimes against Children (CAC) Unit. Key findings and conclusions are drawn primarily from information provided directly by INTERPOL member countries either through individual contributions or completion of a dedicated questionnaire shared with a select number of countries across all INTERPOL regions.

Contextualizing the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken by many governments to restrict its spread are likely to have had an impact on the trends and threats of CSEA offences across the world. The following shifts in environmental, social and economic factors are of specific consideration in this report:

- the closure of schools and subsequent movement to virtual learning environments;
- the increased time children spend online for entertainment, social and educational purposes;
- the restriction of international travel and the repatriation of foreign nationals;
- confinement measures leading to increased time spent at home;
- limited access to community support services, child care and educational personnel who often play a key role in detecting and reporting cases of child sexual exploitation.

In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on CSEA offences, the use of the Problem Analysis Triangle helps to contextualize the problem. The middle inner layer of the triangle lists the three elements that must be present for a crime to occur and the outer triangle represents the controllers that may intervene on behalf of each element to stop crime from occurring. Figure 1 below is a representation of a Problem Analysis Triangle adapted to the context of online CSEA.



Figure 1: Problem Analysis Triangle in the context of CSEA

The Routine Activity Theory is based on the idea that the structure of routine activities in society influence the kinds of situations that emerge and that changes in these activities can result in changes in the kinds of situations people face. Accordingly, throughout this report, when one or more of the three elements and / or controllers has been altered as a result of the COVID-19 situation, the CSEA landscape also changes.

A summary of how the COVID-19 situation impacts CSEA offences from a theoretical perspective during COVID-19 is detailed in the grid below:

VICTIM

Confinement measures are increasing the amount of time children spend online for educational, entertainment and social purposes.

During COVID-19 children seek alternative ways of socializing through games, chats, social media, etc. whilst not necessarily being aware of any associated risks.

Victims of domestic CSEA may be in lockdown with the offender.

Boredom may lead to increased risk-taking, including an increase in the taking and sharing of self-generated material.

The circulation of viral content leads to continuous re-victimization.

OFFENDER

Offenders who usually operate online are likely to increase the amount of time they spend online.

Offenders continue to adapt and change their online environments to avoid police detection and to target platforms based on popularity with children.

Transnational child sex offenders are facing significant travel restrictions and may transition their offending to an online environment.

Economic hardship from COVID-19 might lead to an increase in CSEA material traded and produced for payment in the future.

LOCATION

The online environment in itself has not changed and CSEA offences continue to take place across multiple channels and platforms.

The emergence of virtual learning environments has led to a new type of livestreaming offence – Zoom ‘bombing’.

GUARDIAN

Children have reduced access to guardians such as teachers, doctors and social services who are often key in identifying and reporting of CSEA.

Parents may have limited opportunities for effective control when juggling work-from-home policies and their professional commitments.

In some cases, parents have increased time for online control thus reducing the risk to children.

In domestic CSEA cases the guardian may be the offender.

HANDLER

Online investigators in some countries have faced some challenges in being fully operational when working from home, especially in the early lockdown stages of COVID-19.

Reduction in the use of the INTERPOL ICSE database is affecting the number of uploads to the database and the collaboration between LEAs across the world.

MANAGER

The detection and removal of online CSEA content has decreased as a result of electronic service provider monitoring teams working from home and a reliance on automated tools.

The sheer number of online applications and platforms make monitoring and detection of cases increasingly difficult for LEA.

IMPACT ON POLICING

Reporting

Countries have reported increased obstacles for victims to report offences and seek medical treatment and other forms of support. This has resulted in underreporting of certain types of offences during the COVID-19 pandemic. A delay in reporting is expected until schools are reopened and / or access to social services returns to normal. There are concerns that some offending may never be reported if the delay in access to services is too long.

Countries have also reported difficulties in contacting victims through conventional means during this period making it difficult to move forward with existing investigations.

Use of INTERPOL databases

Law enforcement personnel working on online child sexual exploitation have been affected by the introduction of work-from-home policies across the world. This, along with shifting priorities due to COVID-19 tasks, has had an impact on the use of the INTERPOL International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database.

Since the introduction of confinement measures, there has been a significant reduction in the number of connecting users and the number of uploads of CSEA material made by investigators worldwide to the database.

60 per cent of member countries who regularly use the **ICSE database** have either **not accessed the database** or have **seen a significant reduction in their activities** during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Impact on CSEA Investigations

CSEA investigations were classified as high priority in a number of member countries which has resulted in COVID-19 having no or a very limited impact on the human resources available to conduct CSEA investigations effectively. Some countries have been able to continue business as usual despite work-from-home instructions or adapted working arrangements in the office (e.g., alternative teams on duty /shift patterns / effective business continuity plans).

Nonetheless, in some countries, COVID-19 measures have resulted in a **reduced number of staff** which has **impacted the effectiveness of investigations**, and the level of emotional and physical stress experienced by investigators. Human resources for intelligence gathering may have been less impacted than local level resources who conduct on the ground enquiries and raids. One country has reported that their digital forensics officers are not available during the COVID-19 pandemic which has delayed some of their investigations.

Recommendations for countries impacted by limited human resources include the adaptation of workflows to include the assessment of reports on a case-by-case basis for severity and resources requirements, considering hands-on offenders as the highest priority. Victim interviews, arrests, and warrant executions have continued to occur in some cases with COVID-19-related precautionary measures in place, but have been deferred in other cases that have been deemed to be less time-sensitive.

Countries have reported **some impact on technical resources** due to work-from-home policies such as no ability to connect remotely to police networks. Recommendations include the acquisition of secure VPN connections for remote working and the use of alternative worksites that may be vacant due to non-critical operations.

Electronic Service Providers

The World Health Organization (WHO) has called for technology companies and telecoms providers to do everything they can to keep children safe online given the heightened risks of online harm. "They must do more to detect and stop harmful activity against children online, including grooming and the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse images and videos."³ These efforts will be hampered as social media providers (YouTube, Facebook and Twitter) have warned they are increasingly reliant on artificial intelligence and automated tools for the detection of illegal content on their platforms due to staff facing restrictions whilst working from home. Such software has limitations and may not be as accurate as human review. With fewer service operator moderators able to review material, the take-down and reporting of CSEA material is slower than usual and less effective.

It has been noticed that Darknet offenders have highlighted apparent decreases in platform response times on several social media platforms in removing publicly available CSEA material. These offenders are expressing their eagerness and ability to capitalize on these opportunities to create and distribute new CSEA material.

Legal Services

Courts in some countries have either closed or are seeing significant delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies and tools to address the slowdowns in the justice system are important to avoid offenders not being brought to justice with the risk of them offending further. Some countries have adopted specific measures such as the use of virtual services for legal and psychological advice, police and justice services including hearings and the extension of protection orders for victims.⁴ Others have prioritized cases involving child victims which were only postponed in cases of non-imminent threat.

ONLINE CSEA: EVOLUTION OF CRIME TRENDS AND THREATS DUE TO COVID-19

Confinement measures are increasing the amount of time children and adults spend online for educational, professional, entertainment and social purposes, and are creating an inadvertent risk of sexual exploitation by predators operating online.⁵

This section will explore how the different online platforms and applications have been impacted by COVID-19 measures.

Consumption and Distribution of CSEA Material (CSEAM)

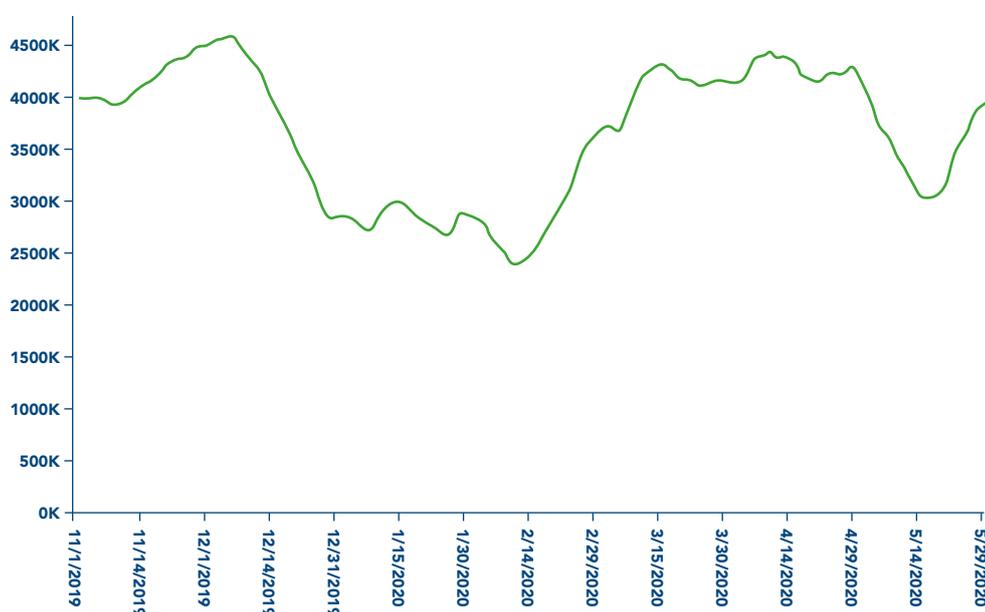
Several member countries have seen increases in reporting by the public of online CSEAM offences as well as **increases in online activity relating to CSEAM.**

With increased time being spent online by the general population, and often in more private settings than in the work environment, the illegal consumption of child sexual exploitation material has increased. Member countries and NGOs have reported increases in online activity relating to CSEAM.

Peer-to-Peer Networks

Information from multiple sources including INTERPOL member countries indicate a **significant increase in the sharing of CSEAM** through the use of peer-to-peer networks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 – published by the Child Rescue Coalition – contains analysis of data from November 2019 to May 2020, and shows the CSEAM file shares via peer-to-peer networks.

CSAM Sharing on Selected Peer to Peer Networks during COVID-19



Darknet Forums

Further analysis is still required to fully establish the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic on Darknet trends and threats. There are **differences in reporting by member countries** at this stage with regard to the volume of new CSEAM in distribution. One assessment is while the **exchange of existing CSEAM and CSEAM discussions have clearly increased, the volume of transmission for personal production appears to be stable.**

Those with the technical expertise to administrate and create forums are likely to have more time to create new forums, whilst users are likely to have more time to organize their collections. The uploading of old collections may lead to the generation of new investigative opportunities if different versions of material are distributed online.

Social Media Platforms

The number of people spending time online during the COVID-19 lockdown period will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of people who come across and report CSEAM on the clear net. Several countries have reported **increases in the distribution of viral content** including:

- CSEAM shared as outraged bystanders are helping to identify and rescue the victim;
- Memes and comics, mainly intended for inappropriate humour, outrage, or shock classified by electronic service providers as CSEAM.

Viral content does not necessarily have a correlation with the number of offenders active online or the number of unique CSEAM being distributed. Nevertheless, the continuous re-victimization of the victim and the increased risk of innocent members of the public being inadvertently exposed to CSEAM means the effective management of viral CSEAM content on the clear net is an important factor.

Besides the significant increase in viral control, several countries have reported some **notable increases and trends in the distribution of CSEAM on the clear net:**

- An increase in users on **clear net applications discussing and sharing child abuse material;**
- An increase in the distribution of **self-generated material.**

Messaging Applications / Platforms

Messaging applications continue to be used by offenders during the COVID-19 pandemic to access children and distribute CSEAM. As with social media platforms, **an increase in the circulation of viral CSEA videos via messaging applications has been reported.**

Several member countries have reported **no significant changes regarding the use of messaging applications in light of COVID-19.** For those that have, trends have been identified for specific messaging platforms.

Zoom 'bombing'

The term has been coined in recent months to describe incidents where an uninvited person joins a videoconference, or Zoom meeting. The trend has been widely reported in the media and concerns were raised with regard to the Zoom application's privacy and security measures. Member countries have reported isolated incidents of Zoom 'bombing' during virtual learning classes for children (no more than five per country) across the world (Asia-Pacific, Europe, South, Central and North America). In these incidents, an unknown person connects to the Zoom meeting and shares CSEAM on the screen.

Online Gaming

There are significant increases in the use of online gaming platforms associated with lockdown measures introduced across the world. At this stage, countries are reporting no significant changes in the volume of cases of children being targeted by sexual offenders on these platforms. Gaming platforms continue to be used for the distribution of CSEAM and as a means for offenders to make contact with children.

Although information is still scarce at this stage, some countries have reported a number of gaming related platforms which have come to attention of CSEA investigations in recent months.

CSEAM for Payment

Although information is still scarce on the subject, there are some indications that the trade in CSEAM for payment may emerge a threat in the coming months.

OFFLINE CSEA: EVOLUTION OF CRIME TRENDS AND THREATS DUE TO COVID-19

Cultural, societal and economic differences across the globe mean that different countries may report on different challenges relating to offline CSEA. The line between online and offline abuse is blurred and during COVID-19 one country reported that CSEAM circulated online is often of children inside their homes or their neighbours' homes.

In another country, it is reported that approximately two thirds of contact abuse takes place within the family environment and that there is likely to be limited change to the number of individuals engaged in such offending.

INTERPOL member countries have reported two distinct trends of increases and decreases with regard to the number of police reports of child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 lockdown period from March to May 2020 compared to previous periods.

As restrictions are relaxed, it is highly likely that there will be a larger increase in the reporting of child abuse and sexual assaults. For those countries that have reported decreases, they expect an increase in reporting once lockdown measures are eased and children are able to report offences when they return to school and have time away from the offender.

Transnational Child Sex Offenders

Member countries are generally reporting **a significant reduction in the activities and offences related to transnational child sex offenders**. With borders closed and international travel restricted in many countries, offenders have limited opportunities to travel to offend.

It is possible that Transnational Child Sex Offenders who have contacts in other countries with the aim of travelling to offend against children, will seek alternative ways to carry out such sexual exploitation.

Options may include accessing CSEAM online through the use of the methods described earlier. Notably, live-streaming provides opportunities for offenders to indirectly abuse children overseas through a facilitator in situ.

Live-streaming of child sexual exploitation for payment has seen an increase in recent years, and the demand is likely to rise as travel restrictions remain in place. The supply of live-streamed CSEAM is also likely to increase as victims may be locked down with facilitators (often a family member) and economic hardship increases.

Offenders conducting such abuse sometimes follow it up with travel to directly sexually abuse the same victims. The close monitoring of travel for registered child sex offenders when travel restrictions are relaxed is highly recommended to protect victims overseas.

Domestic Child Abuse

The true extent of **domestic child sexual abuse** during the COVID-19 pandemic will only be known after lockdown measures have been relaxed as reporting is made difficult when children are in lockdown with the primary offender.

The WHO considers that “[m]ovement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home – particularly those children already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations.” ECPAT Samoa reported that during the two weeks prior to 7 April, they received more calls to their helpline than ever before as women and children sought help in situations of violence at home.

At the same time, it was reported that **the public aid agencies’ capacity to uncover sexual abuse of children had been severely reduced** and with a marked decline in reported violence and sexual offences.

Some countries have **reported concerns with regard to the impediments victims face in accessing safe accommodation, alternative care options and related health-services** during COVID-19 which is likely to increase the risk to victims as they have to remain in a potentially abusive home environment.

Vulnerable Communities

International child protection/rights organizations mention that during previous public health emergencies (vis., Ebola in 2014-16 in West Africa), the closure of schools contributed to spikes in sexual abuse of children and teenage pregnancies. In Sierra Leone cases of teenage pregnancy more than doubled to 14,000.⁶ Vulnerable children are at heightened risk of exploitation, notably those living without parental care, a situation which will likely be increased by COVID-19. There is an increased risk of sexual exploitation of children, including sex for assistance, commercial sexual exploitation of children and forced early marriage.

In areas severely affected by COVID-19, situations where parents are hospitalized and children are placed under others’ care or are uncared for, are likely to increase the risk of abuse.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 **impact on policing** has varied by country but some key issues identified include:

- a reduction or delay in reporting of CSEA offences as normal reporting channels are affected;
- a reduction in the use of the INTERPOL ICSE database by member countries;
- a reduction in the availability of specialist law enforcement human resources that support CSEA investigations;
- changes in processes and efficiency due to technical constraints of working-from home which has impacted both law enforcement and electronic service providers reporting to law enforcement;
- delays or closures in courts leading to delays in processing cases.

The nature of offences committed during the COVID-19 pandemic relating to online CSEA has not changed in relation to known modus operandi but offenders are exploiting the lockdown measures in order to carry on offending and target children online.

A series of conditions relating to changes in the social and physical environments of victims and offenders during COVID-19 has resulted in them spending an increased amount of time online. This meeting of potential victims and offenders online is one of the key factors that leads to the increased threat picture for children despite no noticeable changes in modus operandi.

Despite this, the information provided by member countries analysed in this report **identified some trends that help to better understand the current problem of online CSEA**. The objective is to share these trends across the global law enforcement community in order to enhance the monitoring and detection of CSEA and further investigations:

- An increase in online CSEA activity on both the Darknet and clear net but there is no information at this stage to indicate an increase in new CSEAM in circulation;
- A significant increase in the sharing of CSEAM through the use of peer-to-peer networks;
- A significant increase in viral content shared through both social media platforms and messaging applications resulting in repeat victimization of victims and exposure to innocent bystanders;
- An increase in the self-generated material distributed on the clear net;
- No significant changes in the volume of offences using online gaming platforms but certain games have been identified as having a potential risk interest;

- Early indications that CSEAM for payment may be an emerging trend in certain countries;
- A significant decrease in transnational child sex offender activities abroad due to travel restrictions;
- A growing concern relating to domestic child abuse, under-reporting and victims' limited access to support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEMBER COUNTRIES

Intelligence

- Regularly share information related to **emerging threats and trends** related to online CSEA for increased monitoring and reporting. INTERPOL can play a key role in driving enhanced cooperation and information sharing mechanisms with providers across different jurisdictions. The sheer number of providers entering the market requires a coordinated approach not only for the reporting of incidents but also for the detection of CSEA cases and the sharing of information with law enforcement.
- Use INTERPOL **capacity building, training and technical support** relating to Victim Identification, the ICSE Database, Open Source and Darknet Investigations.

Prevention and Detection

- Create **prevention and awareness campaigns** for victims and guardians relating to the risk of CSEA online including campaigns communicated through gaming, messaging and social media platforms.
- Deliver a strong message from law enforcement that impunity will not be tolerated through **adult-targeted online / offline campaigns** that communicate the penalties associated with these offences.
- Collaboration between INTERPOL member countries and electronic service providers to produce **joint awareness campaigns** for parents and children.
- Conduct **incident mapping exercises** across schools to identify emerging issues relating to CSEA (e.g., Zoom 'bombing' incidents).
- Ensure **hotlines remain open and staffed**; consider other forms of technology for victims to report offences (e.g. toll-free texting service, integrated reporting channels for children through gaming / social media / messaging).
- **Reinforce the relationship between law enforcement and victim hotline providers** to ensure emerging CSEA threats and trends are communicated in a timely manner.
- Virtual justice systems, support and medical services: **adapt tools to allow for the continuous provision of services** to children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Enforcement

- **Prioritize CSEA investigations** to allow for the necessary human and technical resources to be allocated to the investigation of the most severe offences.
- In so far as possible, law enforcement is to **continue to conduct operational activities** and apprehend offenders notably in cases where the offender continues to have access to children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NOTES

¹ ECPAT (2020), Why children are at risk of sexual exploitation during COVID-19, viewed and retrieved 7 April 2020 from <https://ecpat.exposure.co/covid19?embed=true>

² UNICEF (2020), COVID-19: Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures, viewed and retrieved 20 March 2020 from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-children-heightened-risk-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence-amidst>

³ WHO (2020), Joint Leader's statement - Violence against children: A hidden crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, viewed and retrieved 8 April 2020 from <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-joint-leader-s-statement---violence-against-children-a-hidden-crisis-of-the-covid-19-pandemic>

⁴ UN Women (2020), COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls, viewed and retrieved 13 May 2020 from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>

⁵ FBI (2020), School Closings Due to COVID-19 Present Potential for Increased Risk of Child Exploitation, viewed and retrieved 23 March 2020 from <https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation>

⁶ UNICEF (2020), COVID-19: Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures, viewed and retrieved 20 March 2020 from <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-children-heightened-risk-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence-amidst>



INTERPOL

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INTERPOL is the world's largest international police organization. Our role is to assist law enforcement agencies in our 194 member countries to combat all forms of transnational crime. We work to help police across the world meet the growing challenges of crime in the 21st century by providing a high-tech infrastructure of technical and operational support. Our services include targeted training, expert investigative support, specialized databases and secure police communications channels.

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