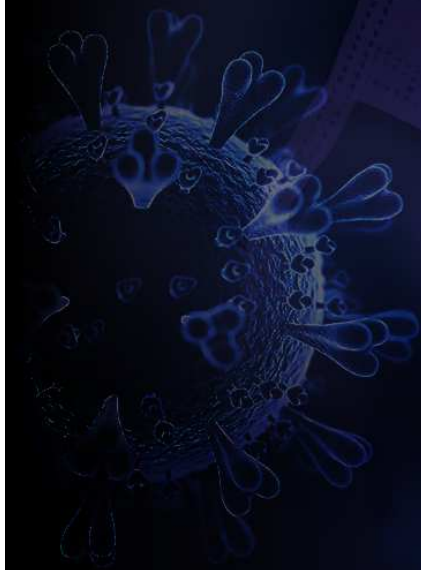


# **EXPLOITING ISOLATION: Offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic**

**19 June 2020**



# FOREWORD

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 victimisation. The impact of this crime area can hardly be overstated and an effective response is of utmost importance.

Europol's role is to coordinate Member States' investigations into those who abuse children, encourage and enable that abuse, or make abuse material available through online platforms. Europol uses intelligence products to inform law enforcement partners about suspects' activities and behaviour, and to potentially identify both offenders and victims. Europol works with partners to organise prevention and awareness raising campaigns and will contribute its expertise to the discussions around the upcoming EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse.

**CATHERINE DE BOLLE**  
Executive Director, Europol



## KEY FINDINGS

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Europol has been monitoring the impact of the virus on the serious and organised crime landscape. The area of cybercrime is one of the crime areas most affected by the COVID-19 crisis. This includes online child sexual abuse<sup>1</sup>. As both children and offenders have been forced to stay home and spend more time on the internet, the threat stemming from online child sexual abuse has increased.

Online Child Sexual Abuse<sup>2</sup> 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 coronavirus, 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.

This report examines activities involving the sexual abuse and exploitation of children online and related offline crimes with a particular focus on how offenders have used their time during confinement to increase children's vulnerability. The findings of this report are mainly based on contributions from Member States and Europol's partner countries and input from a number of organisations<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The terms child sexual abuse and child sexual abuse material includes child sexual abuse material and material that may be produced through the exploitation of a child in exchange for some material gain. It is used in this report in accordance with the Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, accessible at <http://luxembourgguidelines.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Europol encourages the use of the term 'child (sexual) abuse material' and not 'child pornography'. The use of the term 'child pornography' helps child sex abusers as it indicates legitimacy and compliance on the part of the victim, and therefore legality on the part of the sex abuser. By using the phrase 'child pornography', it conjures up images of children posing in 'provocative' positions, rather than suffering horrific abuse. Every photograph or video captures an actual situation where a child has been abused. This is not pornography.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Child Rescue Coalition, INHOPE, INSAFE and WebIQ.



# AN INCREASE IN ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: INDICATORS EXPLAINED

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Europol has been monitoring various indicators to assess the scope of online child sexual abuse and to determine whether there is an increase in the production and/or distribution of CSAM. Although the data is still fragmented and incomplete, there are strong indications there has been an increase in the number of cases of child sexual abuse. Referrals from industry and third party countries have reached record highs in recent months, particularly in relation to material accessed and distributed on the surface web and in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks during the COVID-19 crisis. Activities on dark web forums have also increased, including high levels of posts and responses. In many ways, these discussions were 'business as usual'.

Main CSAM indicators showing an increase:

- referrals from National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)<sup>4</sup>;
- number of attempts to access online CSAM;
- activity on P2P networks;
- the number of reports from the public to law enforcement or other institutions;
- the volume of new posts on online forums dedicated to child sexual abuse compared to established baselines;
- activity on dark web forums

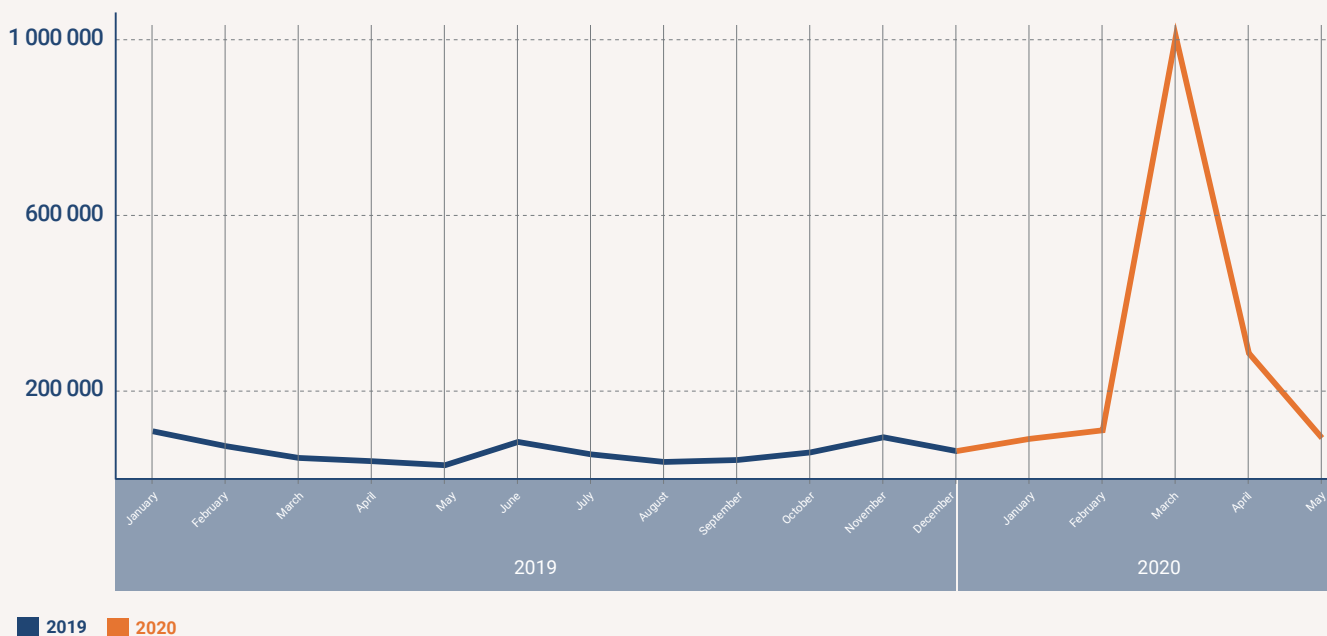
4 Online platforms providing social media and messaging services refer CSAM detected on their platforms to NCMEC.

## Referrals from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

The number of referrals from NCMEC to Europol is an indicator of the amount of CSAM distributed on the surface web. This number began to rise at the beginning of March 2020, around the same time the first EU Member States enforced their respective lockdowns. Referrals in April 2020 were still considerably higher than usual; however, by May 2020 the situation seemed to have nearly returned to that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Total number of referrals submitted to Europol from NCMEC

Source: NCMEC, May 2020

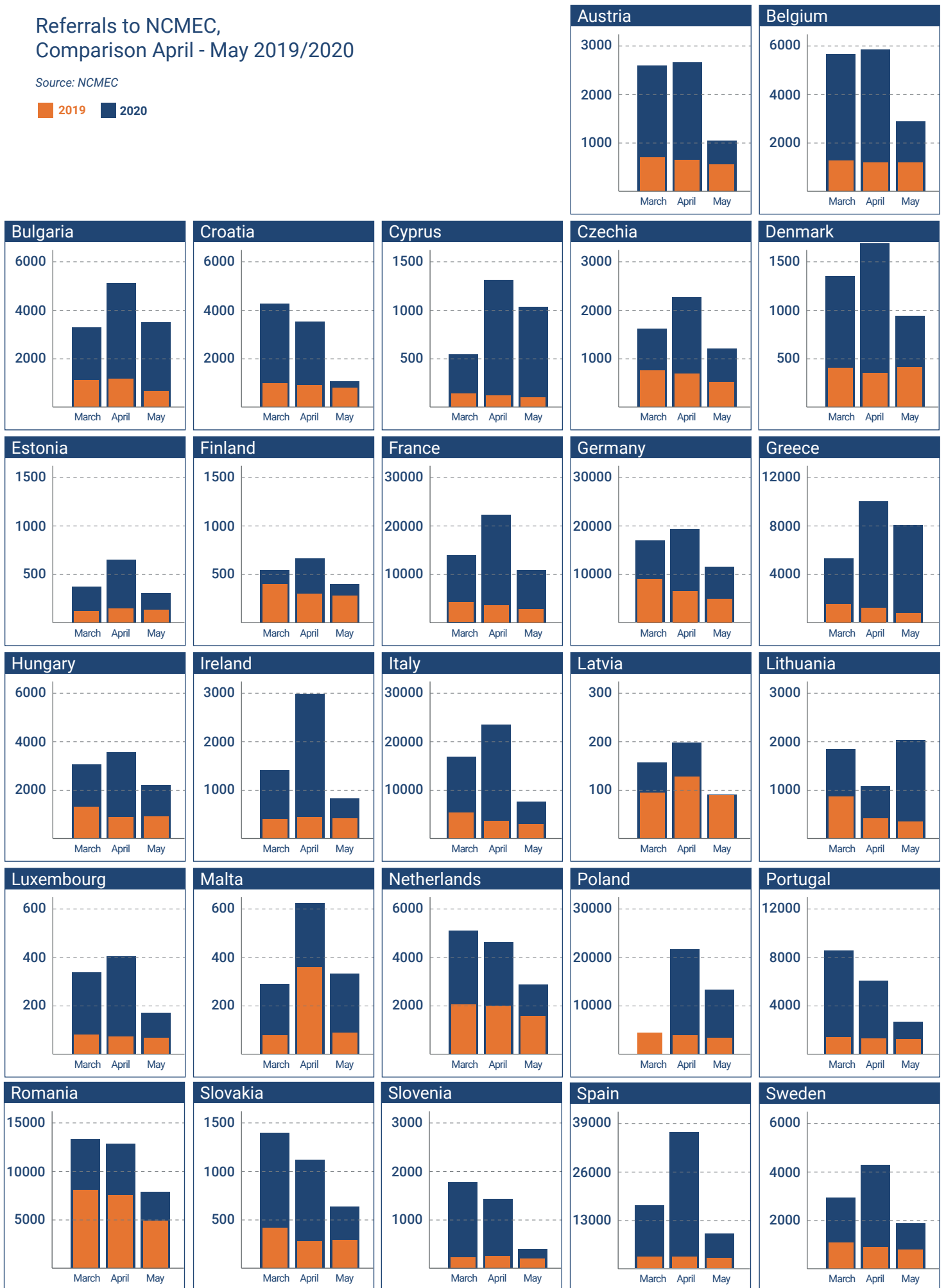


The number of referrals for Member States affected by the COVID-19 crisis shows a clear increase in the period from March to May 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

# Referrals to NCMEC, Comparison April - May 2019/2020

Source: NCMEC

2019 2020



## Number of attempts to access online child sexual abuse material

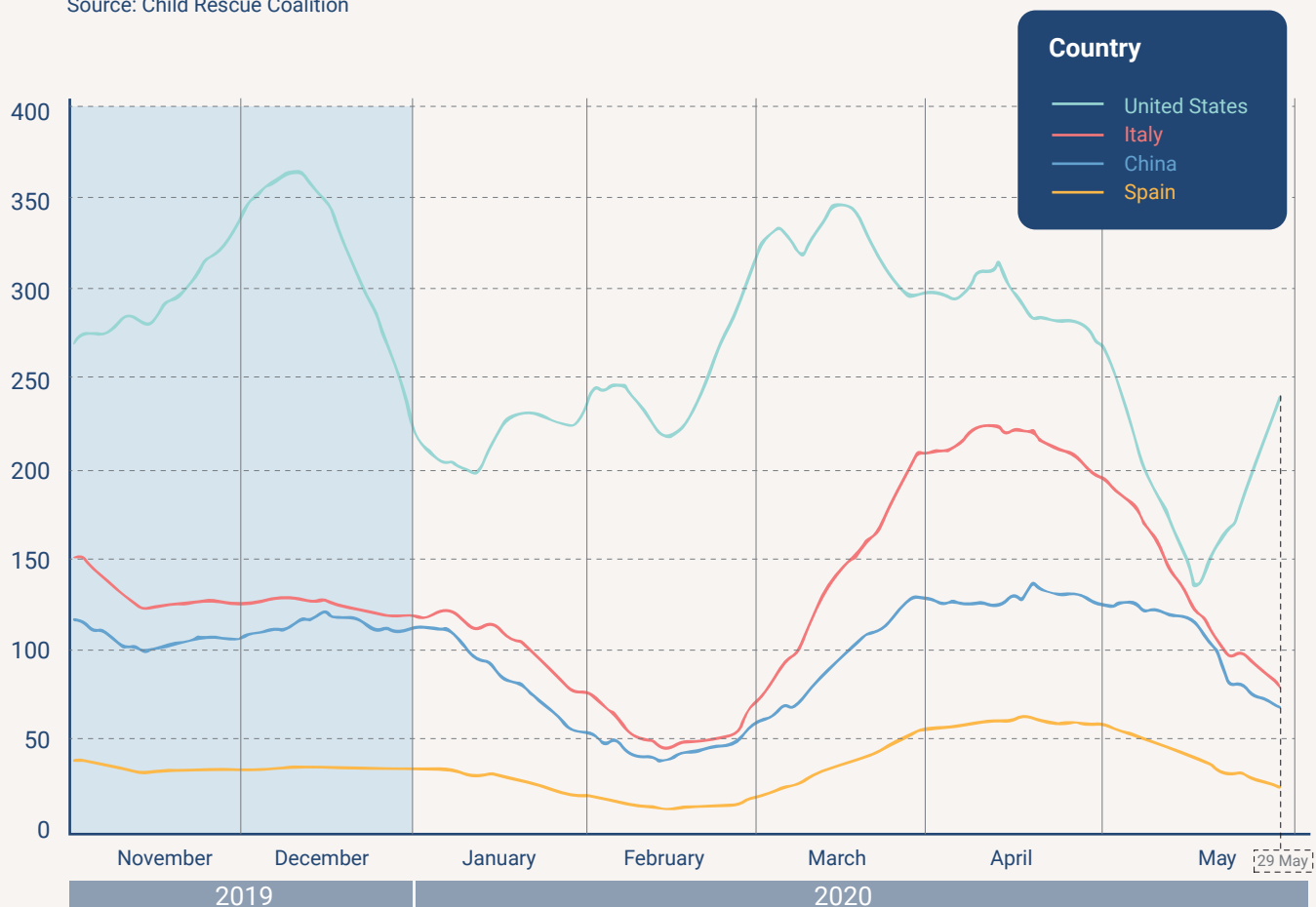
EU Member States have reported an increase in the number of blocked attempts to access websites featuring CSAM during their lockdowns<sup>5</sup>. Such reports are in line with figures from the Internet Watch Foundation<sup>6</sup>, which reported almost 9 million blocked attempts to access CSAM in April in the United Kingdom alone<sup>7</sup>. In some countries, this is matched by an increase in the number of reported CSAM offences, such as online solicitation and sextortion<sup>8</sup>.

## Activity on peer-to-peer networks

P2P networks are among the most common platforms for offenders to share CSAM with each other<sup>9</sup>. Several EU Member States have reported an increase in detected CSAM on P2P networks especially in the second half of March when lockdowns in EU Member States started materialising. Figures from the Child Rescue Coalition for detections of CSAM on P2P networks in Italy and Spain – two EU Member States which were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – confirm this picture, with both countries reporting a considerable increase in March and April 2020.

### CSAM Sharing on Peer to Peer networks during COVID-19 by country

Source: Child Rescue Coalition



5 Europol, 2020, Catching the virus: Cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>.

6 The Internet Watch Foundation is a registered charity based in the United Kingdom. Its remit is "to minimise the availability of online sexual abuse content, specifically child sexual abuse images and videos hosted anywhere in the world and non-photographic child sexual abuse images hosted in the UK."

7 Internet Watch Foundation, 2020, Millions of attempts to access child sexual abuse online during lockdown, accessible at <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/millions-of-attempts-to-access-child-sexual-abuse-online-during-lockdown>

The Guardian 2020, Watchdog reveals 8.8m attempts to access online child abuse in April, accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/20/watchdog-reveals-88m-attempts-to-access-online-child-abuse-in-april>

8 Contribution from Member States.

9 Europol, 2019, IOCTA 2019, accessible at [https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta\\_2019.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta_2019.pdf)

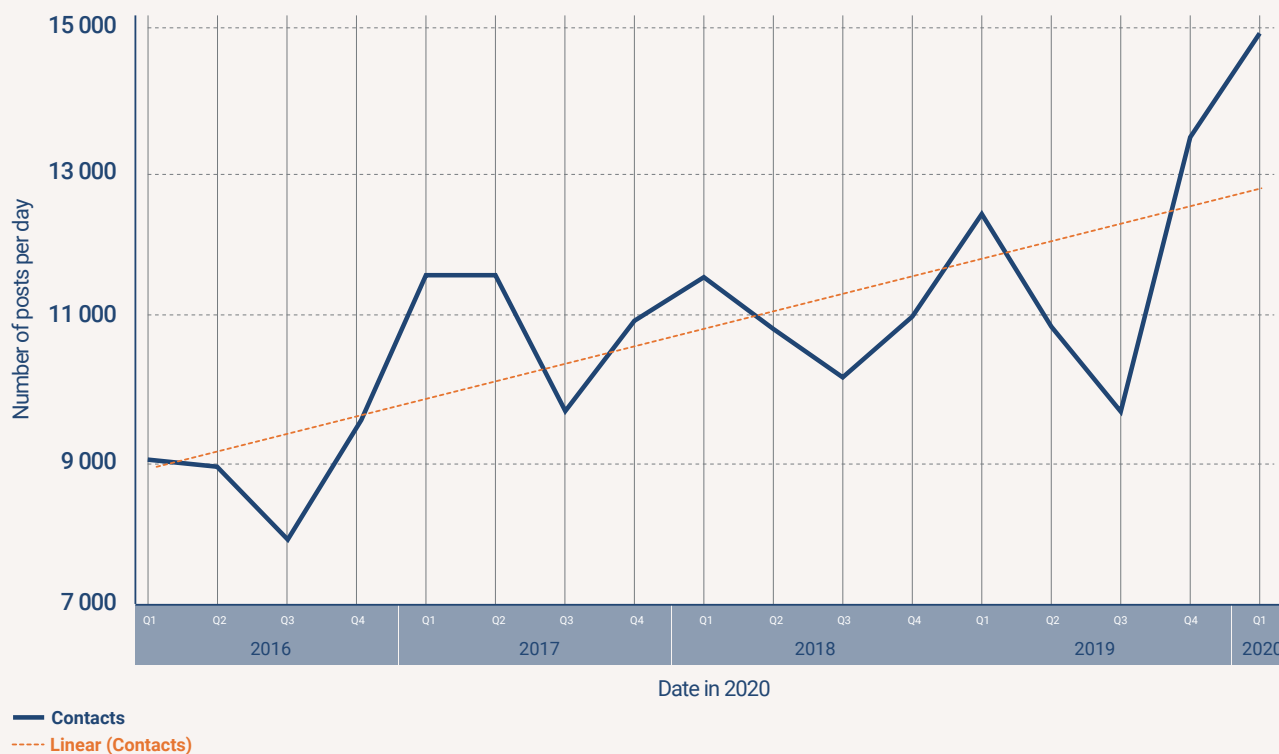


## Number of reports from the public to law enforcement or other institutions

Data from INSAFE, a global network of hotlines against CSAM online, shows the contact made to helplines in the first quarter of 2020 saw a sharp increase compared to previous periods, resulting in the highest number of contacts in one quarter in the last four years.

### Number of contacts received by EU Helplines January 2016 – March 2020

Source: INSAFE, March 2020



Teenagers in particular contacted the helplines more frequently and increasingly via electronic means instead of phone calls. It is important to note that contacts are about a range of different issues, with child sexual abuse-related matters being only one of them. The increase in contacts may reflect the figures referred to in previous Europol<sup>10</sup> and other reports<sup>11</sup> on the increased vulnerability and isolation of many children during this period.

### Volume of new posts in online forums dedicated to child sexual exploitation compared to baselines

To assess this indicator, Web-IQ, a private-sector company that monitors dark web and other online activity, has provided Europol with information. The data indicates that in one particular dark web child sexual abuse chat site there have been increasing levels of activity, in particular since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

<sup>10</sup> Europol, 2020, Catching the virus: Cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>

Europol, 2020, Beyond the pandemic: How COVID-19 will shape the serious and organised crime landscape in the EU, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>11</sup> ECPAT International, 2020, WHY CHILDREN ARE AT RISK OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION DURING COVID-19, accessible at [https://ecpat.exposure.co/covid19?utm\\_source=Website&utm\\_campaign=Hero](https://ecpat.exposure.co/covid19?utm_source=Website&utm_campaign=Hero)

UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, 2020, COVID-19 Position paper: The impact and consequences of the COVID 19 pandemic on trafficked and exploited persons, accessible at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Trafficking/COVID-19-Impact-trafficking.pdf>

## Daily posts on the biggest English-speaking dark web chat thread on one site

Zero means the site was unavailable.

Source: WebIQ



One dark web site used for the distribution of CSAM has shown increasing levels of activity, including high levels of posting and responses relating to the topics of sexual abuse of male children and comments on particular images and videos made available in posts. It is important to note that activity across dark web sites varies on an ongoing basis, depending on their popularity, availability and a range of other factors.

Monitoring of these sites by Europol verified that there was an increase in activity from March to May 2020 on the same dark web site, particularly in relation to posts about videos captured through webcam. These videos range from children who are being forced or coerced by an offender into producing abuse material to other videos of a sexual nature produced by children for peers or for social media attention and include videos being captured without their knowledge. The categories the child abuse material are listed under include 'spycams', 'webcams' and 'live streams'. In another dark web forum, a section specifically for those capturing this live stream footage, known as 'cappers', saw the numbers of messages and threads more than triple from 500 messages from December 2019 to February 2020, to 1 500 from March to May 2020. This reinforces concerns previously expressed by

Europol<sup>12</sup> and others<sup>13</sup> about the quantity of material appearing to be self-produced by children themselves. Some of this activity may relate to annual 'competitions' organised within forums to gather and promote video captures of child sexual exploitation and abuse material.

Overall, the total number of files made available by offenders to one another across several prominent dark web forums increased significantly during the period March to May 2020. In one case, the number of files made available increased by almost 50 % and in another case, it almost doubled.

### Activity on dark web forums

Criminal activities related to the production and exchange of child abuse material started to transform around 2012, when the dark web started to be widely used for all kinds of illegal activities. Law enforcement operations and improvements in technological solutions have further changed the conduct of individuals involved in online child sexual abuse, forcing them to change their behaviour to increase their anonymity online. Many child sexual abuse offenders have gradually moved from the surface web to the dark web. The Tor network in particular has been abused

12 Europol, 2019, IOCTA 2019, accessible at [https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta\\_2019.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta_2019.pdf)

13 Internet Watch Foundation, 2018, Trends in Online Child Sexual Exploitation: Examining the Distribution of Captures of Live-streamed Child Sexual Abuse, accessible at <https://www.iwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/Distribution%20of%20Captures%20of%20Live-streamed%20Child%20Sexual%20Abuse%20FINAL.pdf>

Netclean, 2019, Netclean Report 2019, accessible at <https://www.netclean.com/netclean-report-2019/insight-1/>

through the creation of numerous forums and websites by anonymous individuals dedicated to the production and exchange of CSAM, including tips and advice about online grooming and how to safely travel to abuse children. Other online platforms and services, including messaging applications, have also been abused by child sexual offenders to host and exchange CSAM.<sup>14</sup>

In response to law enforcement operations targeting these dark web communities and due to the need to select participants and ensure exchanges of information are strictly related to child sexual abuse, some offenders have created new forums. These forums act as meeting places where participation is structured similarly to criminal organisations, with affiliation rules, codes of conduct, division of tasks and strict hierarchies. The purpose of the structure is to enforce rules and promote individuals based on their contribution to the community, which they do by recording and posting their abuse of children, encouraging others to abuse and providing like-minded, technical and practical support to one another.

#### **Commandments:**

Rules that will be enforced.

- Do not reveal or request any kind of identifiable personal information. Prostitution included. This also talking about meeting in real life.
- Do not flame, attack or gratuitously offend other members or staff.
- Use English in the main forum.
- Do not post links to banned hosts and unsecure websites.
- Post your own links. Do not post links copied from other people without their permission.
- Posts with no previews will be removed.
- No adult content (over 18).
- No hurtcore (rape, torture, gore, snuff and blackmail). Medical content is not forbidden, but brutal medical procedures like autopsies, circumcisions and others may be considered improper and removed. Necrophilia may also be considered improper.
- No trade offers outside of Public Market. Selling and buying included.
- Do not teach or ask for advice on how to drug children.

#### **Recommendations:**

Rules that may not be enforced.

- Do not post files with no password.
- Do not post files with explicit identifiable names. Use names that are unrelated, unsuspecting.
- Do not post .zip files. Use .rar or .7z.
- No thanks, re-up and wrong password spam.

\* None of these rules is absolute. Occurrences will be judged on a case-by-case basis.

\* This topic may be updated without warning at any given time.

\* You have the right to remove your account and posts at any time. You can do that [here](#)

**Figure 1** Rules for users of one online platform used to distributed child abuse material.

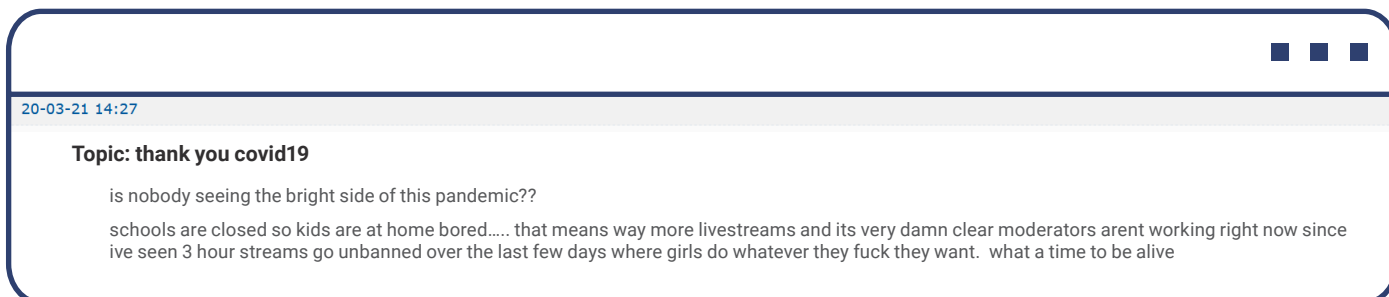
Source: Extracted by Europol, June 2020.

Strict observance of the rules is requested by the administrators to avoid being banned from the forum. In addition, compliance with the rules and active participation can lead to a progressive increase in rank.

Users regularly publish information and safety manuals aimed at avoiding detection by law enforcement authorities. Some users are also attentive to law enforcement operations and regularly publish news articles or even summary reports of the techniques used during successful operations. Cross-posting across various boards and forums highlights a collective approach to improve operational security for all.

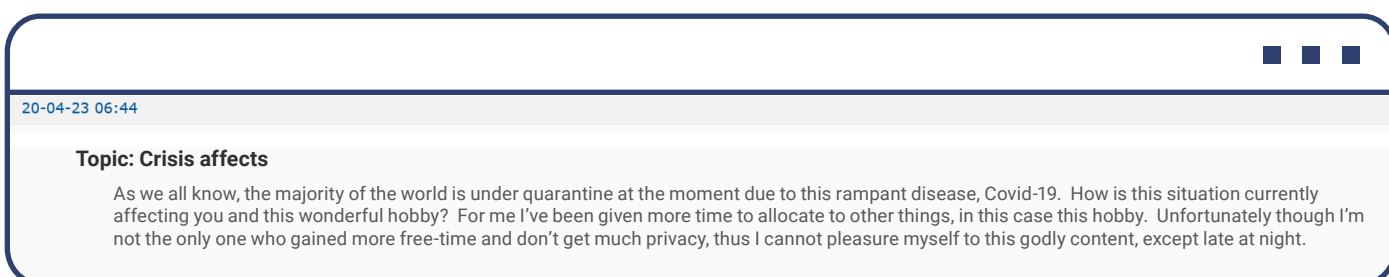
<sup>14</sup> Europol, 2017, Global action tackles distribution of child sexual exploitation images via WhatsApp: 39 arrested so far [Press release 18 April 2017], accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/global-action-tackles-distribution-of-child-sexual-exploitation-images-whatsapp-39-arrested-so-far>  
Europol 2019, Operation Chemosh: How encrypted chat groups exchanged emoji 'stickers' of child sexual abuse [Press release 11 December 2019], accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/operation-chemosh-how-encrypted-chat-groups-exchanged-emoji-%E2%80%99stickers%E2%80%99-of-child-sexual-abuse>

Constant monitoring of these communities has indicated that activities of child sexual abuse offenders on the dark web have been less affected by the lockdowns than those on the surface web. As previously reported by Europol, there have been numerous discussions about COVID-19 on dark web forums dedicated to child sexual exploitation, including enthusiastic messages about the opportunities provided when children will be online more than before.<sup>15</sup>



Source: Extracted by Europol, June 2020.

However, most of the discussions have focussed on the problems caused by the lockdowns and activities within these communities. Pre-existing restraints, such as limited access to children, are discussed alongside more general discussions about the social impact of COVID-19.



Source: Extracted by Europol, June 2020.

In many ways discussions and activities on online forums are very much 'business as usual'. For example, competitions for the best child sexual abuse videos shared within the community have been organised, but as mentioned previously, this has been the case in previous years.

Monitoring of specific topics dedicated to the production of CSAM through grooming and sextortion also showed no significant change in behaviour during the lockdown. Shared material and posts were very similar to those for the same period one year ago.

15 Europol, 2020, Catching the virus: Cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic>

## INTERNATIONAL POLICE COOPERATION LEADS TO THE ARREST OF A DARK WEB CHILD SEX ABUSER IN SPAIN

*International cooperation was key to cracking a case of online CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION - Europol supported the Spanish National Police by analysing information received from Queensland Police in Australia.*

*The COVID-19 crisis forced experts from the Central Cybercrime Unit to carry out their duties from Madrid and coordinate officers on the ground in Barcelona remotely.*

*The operation to bring down a child sex abuser, who had made explicit videos of an underage boy, owes its success to international cooperation. Information from Queensland Police – Australia's Taskforce Argos sent via Europol's secure communication channel allowed Europol experts to carry out operational analysis, which revealed that a video from 2015 found in Belgium and France may have been filmed in Spain.*

### A crucial breakthrough on Social Media

*The analysis of the images and video – which showed how the suspect abused a boy who was under five years old at the time – led the Spanish National Police (Policía Nacional) to locate the suspect. When looking into the message published with the video, officers noticed that the suspect used words and phrases from Spain and not from a Latin American country.*

*Using operational analysis, open-source enquiries and cross-checking information, Europol experts found that the suspect was registered on several websites and boards dedicated to child sexual abuse and exploitation on the dark web. The investigation revealed that the suspect was also using a social media network where he was in touch with a woman who shared the same surname as the one in the title of the sexual abuse video.*

### COVID-19 Pandemic forces a change of tactics

*Due to the lockdown in Spain, cybercrime experts from the Spanish National Police Central High-Tech Crime Unit based in Barcelona were assisted remotely by other experts in Madrid. The material seized showed how the arrested suspect was using several email addresses and dark web access points to commit this horrific crime. The material seized is pending analysis, which is of special value as it could provide important clues about other child sex abusers on the dark web.*

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<sup>16</sup> Europol, 2020, International police cooperation leads to the arrest of a dark web child sex abuser in Spain [Press release 21 April 2020], accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/international-police-cooperation-leads-to-arrest-of-dark-web-child-sex-abuser-in-spain>



# MODI OPERANDI

## Surface web

The vast majority of online CSAM is detected on image hosting websites that are accessible from the surface web and on P2P networks.<sup>17</sup>

Offenders keep using a number of ways to disguise online CSAM, making it more complicated for law enforcement authorities to detect such images and videos. Although the online distribution of CSAM continues to take place via a variety of platforms, P2P network sharing remains among the most popular way among perpetrators to share CSAM. One-to-one distribution and sharing among larger groups routinely take place on social networking platforms. This harmful sharing and re-sharing of content that victimises children has been repeatedly detected at record levels during the COVID-19 pandemic within Europe<sup>18</sup>. NCMEC has stated that there has been a 106% increase in such activity across the globe<sup>19</sup>.

Such material is created through a range of

means. One of the most harmful is direct contact sexual abuse of children by offenders. However, the ability of offenders to trick, coerce and sexually extort children into producing child abuse material without ever meeting them online has also prominently featured in recent cases<sup>20</sup>. The effects noted by victims in such cases are also extremely damaging.

## Dark web

Dedicated bulletin boards on the dark web were popular among offenders as a channel for the distribution of CSAM during this period. This is especially the case for offenders with niche interests, including CSAM with infants and non-verbal children and demeaning material depicting torture and severe cruelty against children. In many cases, offenders use encryption and install software to cover their IP address and prevent identification, such as virtual private networks (VPNs) and Tor.

<sup>17</sup> Europol, 2019, IOCTA 2019, accessible at [https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta\\_2019.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/iocta_2019.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> NCMEC data for Europe 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Forbes, 2020, Child Exploitation Complaints Rise 106% To Hit 2 Million In Just One Month: Is COVID-19 To Blame?, accessible at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#71cff86e4c9c>

<sup>20</sup> Independent, 2020, Matthew Falder: One of Britain's most prolific paedophiles challenges 32-year prison sentence for 'sadistic' crimes, accessible at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/matthew-falder-paedophile-appeal-prison-sentence-blackmail-cambridge-a8585881.html>

*During the pandemic and within ten days of the discovery of videos online, the Italian State Police arrested a 30-year-old man following an international police investigation to track down an individual producing CSAM.*

*The videos, which were released and offered for sale on the dark web, showed the suspect violently sexually abusing a pre-school-aged girl. Analysis of these videos by the Italian State Police identified the location of the abuse, which took place during the lockdown, in a region of northern Italy.*

*Combining the information with open source information and intelligence from Europol, the Italian State Police identified the home of the individual. Working together with the field office of the State Postal and Communications Police, they carried out a thorough search of the suspect's home. Evidence, including items from the abuse videos, was found with thousands of images and videos of sexual exploitation of minors. The victim was identified and made safe and the suspect was arrested and awaits trial.<sup>21</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> Europol, 2020, International collaboration leads to arrest of child sexual abuser in Italy [Press release 27 May 2020], accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/international-collaboration-leads-to-arrest-of-child-sexual-abuser-in-italy>

## Social media applications and encrypted messaging

CSAM is increasingly distributed via social media applications. The self-destruct function of some of these applications makes investigations particularly complicated. In some cases, this is the result of self-generated material being shared with peers, after which it is further distributed via social media and eventually ends up on CSAM platforms. There are also instances where fake social media accounts are created in

order to spread private pictures and videos of underage victims together with their personal information. Although such accounts are often quickly deleted, it is easy for perpetrators to simply create a new account. Encrypted messaging can also be used by those exchanging child abuse material, even allowing them to form communities and groups in order to do so.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Europol, 2019, Operation Chemosh: How encrypted chat groups exchanged emoji 'stickers' of child sexual abuse [Press release 11 December 2019], accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/operation-chemosh-how-encrypted-chat-groups-exchanged-emoji-%E2%80%99stickers%E2%80%99-of-child-sexual-abuse>





# CREATION OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL

Self-generated explicit material (SGEM) has been a growing problem for several years as more and more young children share explicit material online. Growing access to high-quality smartphones and other devices, in combination with a relatively low awareness of the risks of producing and sharing SGEM, means this trend is likely to continue, especially in a period when more and more children are dependent on their smartphone or computer to socialise online.

SGEM can be produced voluntarily, produced under coercion or extortion by a child sex offender. There was already a growing number of minors voluntarily sharing sexual pictures or videos with peers. Over recent months, the quantity of voluntarily produced SGEM has likely been further increasing due to limited physical contact with peers. Children and youngsters are thus making themselves vulnerable to online solicitation by child sexual offenders. There is a risk that the pictures or videos may be spread further, first between other peers, but eventually by online child sex offenders. Such cases can subsequently lead to the minors being subjected to sexual coercion and extortion by online child sex offenders for new SGEM or material involving their siblings or other friends. We may expect to see a further increase of this material being spread and children being victimised in the coming months.

## Sexual coercion and extortion

Although sexual coercion and extortion of minors can be a source of financial gain for offenders, in the majority of cases their aim is to obtain new CSAM. Offenders mostly use existing explicit pictures or videos of a victim and threaten to share this with the victim's network or on social media unless they receive more material<sup>23</sup>. The increase in the level of

material being shared and the amount of SGEM being produced may lead to an increase in sexual coercion and extortion in the near future.

## Monetisation of child sexual abuse material

Although offenders are primarily driven by a desire to access more CSAM than financial gain, in some cases offenders do seek to profit from online child sexual exploitation. Sexually offending children by proxy against children – where offenders watch other offenders live stream abuse, known as 'live streaming' or 'live distant child abuse' – is frequently paid for by offenders. It is a method of exploitation that enables offenders affected by travel restrictions, such as COVID-19, to continue having children abused at their request.

Uploading CSAM to legitimate 'pay-per-click' advertisements on hosting services is another method of monetising CSAM. The CSAM can be initially disguised, thereby increasing the platform's click rate and the potential profits per click. As there has been an increase in sharing CSAM during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is expected that offenders producing CSAM for profit will seek to enlarge their market and number of clients in the coming months.

## First-hand child sexual abuse

Some offenders distributing CSAM online are doing so by recording their own physical sexual abuse of children. The demand for such material perpetuates the ongoing abuse of children by them and others. It is likely that the increase in the circulation of online CSAM in recent weeks will continue to feed the cycle of physical sexual abuse of children and their victimisation in real life and online.

23 Europol, 2017, Online sexual coercion and extortion as a form of crime affecting children: law enforcement perspective, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/online-sexual-coercion-and-extortion-form-of-crime-affecting-children-law-enforcement-perspective>





## CRIMINAL ACTORS AND FUTURE THREATS

It is difficult to assess whether the number of offenders is increasing because of the pandemic. However, the circumstances around the pandemic have given existing offenders access to a broader group of potential victims.

The online offenders remain largely the same. However, those previously travelling to certain risk countries likely were increasingly active online during this period. It will be important to monitor if the online habits of online sexual offenders changed.

The main threats related to online child sexual exploitation have remained relatively stable over the last years and throughout 2019. The pandemic has shifted this assessment. Contact and travel restrictions have led to a surge in the exchange of online CSAM and the consequences of this may have a long-term impact on child sexual exploitation in general.

The proliferation of anonymisation tools and the increase of material available may entail higher risks of repeat victimisation of children.

Online child sexual abuse will remain a significant threat as long as children spend large amounts of time online unsupervised, either during their spare time or while receiving education via remote learning arrangements.

The end of the current crisis and the lifting of lockdown measures may result in an

increased number of reports of child sexual exploitation, as abuse that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic may be reported to law enforcement or other authorities after the fact.

As Europol has previously shown<sup>24</sup>, a relaxation of travel restrictions and opening up of air travel will likely lead to an increase in travelling offenders seeking out child sexual exploitation in certain countries and regions.

If air travel remains limited for the foreseeable future however, or becomes more expensive, it is also possible we will see an increase in virtual and proxy offending via live streaming. Increased poverty stemming from the COVID-19-related economic crisis could be another driving factor for fewer opportunities to travel. The connection between interest in child sexual abuse and the use of paraphilic objects such as childlike sex dolls has been the subject of previous comments by the NCA.<sup>25</sup> The sale of adult sex dolls has increased significantly since quarantine began to the extent that one company anticipated needing new staff to keep up with demand. The adult sex doll company saw a 51.6 % increase in orders from single men in February and March 2020, with a 33.2 % year-on-year growth in orders placed by couples in April.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that this level of demand will also be true for those wishing to use childlike sex dolls while they are confined as replacements for the children they would usually travel to abuse.

<sup>24</sup> Europol, 2020, Beyond the pandemic: How COVID-19 will shape the serious and organised crime landscape in the EU, accessible at

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>25</sup> The Guardian, 2017, Child sex doll imports expose previously unknown offenders, accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jul/31/child-sex-doll-imports-expose-previously-unknown-offenders>

<sup>26</sup> Forbes, 2020, Sex Doll Sales Surge In Quarantine, But It's Not Just About Loneliness, accessible at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/frankicook-ney/2020/05/21/sex-doll-sales-surge-in-quarantine-but-its-not-just-about-loneliness/#56bc7090170f>



## EUROPOL'S RESPONSE

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Europol has not only been monitoring the impact of the crisis on online child sexual exploitation, but has also assured continuous support to EU Member States and other law enforcement partners to respond to these threats. Europol has paid particular attention to the Trace an Object initiative, which follows up on leads submitted by the public and processes new objects for this campaign.

Europol has been holding regular calls with EU agencies and institutions to coordinate strategic and operational responses to online child sexual exploitation during the pandemic and the European Cybercrime Centre at Europol (EC3) has carried out enhanced monitoring of open sources. Despite challenges to operational work during the lockdown period, Europol has been able to ensure availability and business continuity across all areas of support to law enforcement in EU Member States and beyond, including ensuring effective information exchange, analysis and forensic capabilities.

Providing the Member State law enforcement authorities and partners with an up-to-date situational picture is a key priority for Europol during this crisis. To do this, and in response to requests by several Member States that the organisation take a coordinating role, Europol commits resources to the continuous monitoring of the situation and provides immediate support to Member States.

In addition to providing operational support to EU Member States and other partners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Europol also sought to increase ongoing prevention and awareness campaigns that highlight the risks to children's safety online such as the #Say No! campaign.

Other successful campaigns Europol amplified in this period include:

- COVID-19 global parental advice, by the Australian e-Safety Commissioner;
- #DontBeAnEasyCatch campaign, by Saving Missing Children;
- #ProtectChildrenTogether campaign, by Suojellaan Lapsia ry/Skydda Barn rf/ Protect Children.

Since CSAM, particularly from live distant child abuse, primarily originates from developing countries, it is essential that EU law enforcement authorities continue to cooperate with and support the investigations of law enforcement in these jurisdictions.

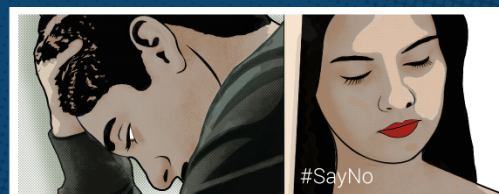
Fighting child sexual exploitation is a joint effort between law enforcement, EU Member States, non-governmental organisations, international organisations and the private sector and increased cooperation is needed to coordinate efforts and prevent a fragmented approach and duplicated efforts.



Online child sexual coercion and extortion is a crime

Has this happened to you?  
**SAY NO!**

We can help you. You are not alone.





**EXPLOITING ISOLATION: OFFENDERS AND VICTIMS OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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