

**Alliance to End Human Trafficking
(AEHT)**

Statement for the Record

**U.S. Senate on the Judiciary
Full Committee Hearing
Protecting Children Online**

January 31, 2024

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The Alliance to End Human Trafficking (AEHT) commends the Senate Judiciary Committee for the public dialog on the important issue of protecting children online. We thank the Committee for addressing this vitally important issue.

AEHT is a collaborative, faith-based national network that offers education, supports access to survivor services, and engages in advocacy to eradicate human trafficking. Our efforts focus on educating the public, preventing any infringement on human dignity, and aiding survivors in leading fulfilling lives. Our members include over 220 congregations of Catholic Sisters, coalitions working against human trafficking, and individuals who share our mission across the United States. Additionally, we are the U.S. member of Talitha Kum, an international organization dedicated to ending human trafficking.

Congress is correctly poised to pass the pending bipartisan legislation¹ aimed at protecting children online. This legislation can pave the way for harnessing technology for beneficial purposes, such as academic learning. Simultaneously, it aims to safeguard children from potential vulnerabilities and sexually abusive grooming through technological platforms, tools, and applications that target them and facilitate online connections with nefarious actors, resulting in detrimental and devastating outcomes, including human trafficking.

AEHT is also poised to help inform the Committee's work on this important issue. Our members have been working for more than a decade to end the scourge of human trafficking, which includes online trafficking of children.² Online child trafficking does not

¹ The *STOP CSAM Act* supports victims and increases accountability and transparency for online platforms. The *EARN IT Act* removes technological companies' blanket immunity from civil and criminal liability under child sexual abuse material (CSAM) laws and establishes a National Commission on Online Child Sexual Exploitation Prevention; The *SHIELD Act* ensures that federal prosecutors have appropriate and effective tools to address the nonconsensual distribution of sexual imagery. The *Project Safe Childhood Act* modernizes the investigation and prosecution of online child exploitation crimes. The *REPORT Act* combats the rise in online child sexual exploitation by establishing new measures to help strengthen reporting of those crimes to the CyberTipline.

² Broadly, human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery. It is a crime under state, federal and international law. It is currently the second largest type of criminal activity, exceeded only by the illegal drug trade. This crime occurs when a trafficker uses force, fraud or coercion to control another person for the purpose of engaging in commercial sex acts or soliciting labor or services against his/her will. Sex

necessitate physical contact between the child and the trafficker. In fact, internet-based child sex trafficking often empowers exploiters to lure or groom minors into creating explicit content (i.e., self-made Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM³).

To highlight some of our credentials, we offer the following brief biographies to illustrate the depth of our commitment to protecting children and the extent of our work:

- **Ann Oestreich, IHM, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary** in Monroe, Michigan, has served in education, communications, and social justice ministries. As President Emeritus of AEHT, she has extensive board experience and served as the North American representative on the Talitha Kum International Coordination Committee.⁴ Her leadership helped establish and grow AEHT's work and commitment to the vulnerable, including protecting children online.
- **Jeanne Christensen, RSM, is a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas**, for more than sixty years. She serves as their Justice Advocate Against Human Trafficking. She has been a member of AEHT since its founding. She has led the work of AEHT by establishing our advocacy initiatives which promote education, awareness, and prevention of human trafficking. Additionally, she led a group of our members who are focused on local, state, and federal development to address the root causes of human trafficking. She is a frequent speaker and recognized leader with substantial experience and substantive knowledge of human trafficking.

trafficking is when a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act is under 18 years of age. Labor trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery. Other forms of trafficking include organ removal, mail-order brides/forced marriages, and child soldiers.

³ Human Trafficking Front has compiled information on this topic available at:

<https://humantraffickingfront.org/online-exploitation-children/#:~:text=Online%20child%20sex%20trafficking%20involves,made%20CSAM%20is%20a%20trafficker>.

⁴ Talitha Kum was established in 2009 with the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) as an international initiative against human trafficking and exploitation. Talitha Kum promotes collaboration among networks organized at national, regional and continental level, actively supporting victims, survivors and people at risk. Consult <https://www.talithakum.info/> for more information.

- **Margaret Anne Meyer, MMM, Medical Missionaries of Mary**, has spent over 20 years working to stop human trafficking. She has a sharp focus on combating the victimization of children through her advocacy work at the federal, state, and local levels. In her experience, one can make a difference in ending human trafficking through direct contact with governmental representatives and legislators where she communicates the needs and vulnerabilities of children. She actively monitors federal legislation that involves online safety of children. She is a steadfast advocate for keeping children safe from predators.
- **Maryann Agnes Mueller, CSSF, is a Felician Sister of North America.** She serves as the full-time justice and peace coordinator in Enfield, Connecticut. She publishes AEHT's monthly "Stop Trafficking" Newsletter. The most-recent issue addresses the grooming of children on social media platforms that is referenced herein and attached in the Appendix for your reference.
- **Pat Millen, OSF, with the Sisters of Saint Francis of Philadelphia**, has been in religious life for over 46 years. Her ministries include serving as a court-appointed special advocate guardian ad litem for children in Washington State. She has experienced first-hand the consequences of human trafficking trauma and its devastating effects on children. She is the Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Coordinator for the West.

These "snapshots" represent the long-standing commitment of women religious in their ministries to be a voice for the voiceless. AEHT has many members and staff who work on a daily basis with the goal of protecting children and others from human traffickers, including in online environments.

The Current Landscape

Children are uniquely vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation, and oftentimes become unwitting victims of trauma, physical, sexual, and mental abuse, among other negative impacts. Human trafficking removes individuals' human dignity, reducing them to commodities that can be bought and sold. It steals the innocence of children, causing lasting damage to their lives and making it challenging for them to regain a sense of self-worth and value.

Human traffickers exploit the vulnerabilities of others and unfortunately, online platforms, including social media sites, can facilitate predators' access to and exploitation of children and teens. In the online world, children's vulnerabilities can include low self-esteem, isolation, a present or past history of abuse, a desire for love or friendship, poverty, seeking work, the pursuit of a dream, trying to belong to a group or to "fit-in," and many other factors. Deception, empty promises, threats, and manipulation by traffickers occur online unbeknownst to parents as children are swept into situations they cannot anticipate and are not equipped to handle.

In the contemporary era, children seamlessly integrate technology into their daily routines, engaging in a spectrum of activities that include early-childhood lessons for learning numbers and colors, interactive online gaming, educational lessons, homework help, collaborative group assignments, social interactions via social media and gaming, presentations, and both recorded and live-streamed videos. The multifaceted utilization of technology through online platforms, tools, and applications begins at a young age and has become an integral part of the American way of life.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology often served as a primary modality used for learning. It was also the one outlet from social isolation to foster human connection that was not possible in an in-person way. As the country adopted technology and became more accustomed to its scope and uses, the post-pandemic years have continued to leverage technology. We expect even broader uses and applications to come.

Given this reality, **it is imperative that Congress take action to ensure that children are protected online from being trafficked.**

Statistics and Research

Various agencies within the U.S. government have identified the risks children face online and the means and methods for human trafficking. The Department of State issues an annual Trafficking in Persons Report⁵, which provides both a domestic and international perspective on human trafficking. Migration and international schemes contribute to this largely underreported crime.

The Polaris Project (Polaris) is nationally known for examining data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline. From January 2020 through August 2022, Polaris identified the following conclusions using data from hotline reports⁶: (a) in situations of sex trafficking, 37% of potential victims were minors; and (b) in situations of labor trafficking, 9% of potential victims were minors.

The 2022 Federal Human Trafficking Report (FHTR)⁷ used different data to analyze human trafficking methods and trends. The 2022 FHTR identified that “the internet has remained the most common location for recruitment of victims of trafficking for 23 years. Since 2000, the FHTR has identified 11% of sex trafficking victims as being recruited online, primarily through social media platforms, web-based messaging applications, online chat rooms, dating [applications], classified advertisements, or job boards.”

In addition, the FHTR notes that “[w]hile the commercial sex industry has existed for centuries, how the industry operates has changed significantly in recent decades with the introduction of technology and the internet. Access to the internet and mobile

⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

⁶ <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Hotline-Trends-Report-2023.pdf>

⁷ https://traffickinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2022-Federal-Human-Trafficking-Report-WEB-Spreads_compressed.pdf

devices allows buyers of commercial sex to purchase commercial sex easily and discreetly through online platforms and social media. In 2022, the primary method traffickers used to solicit buyers of commercial sex was through the internet (53%).

It is also imperative to note the variety of authorities that have documented the online exploitation of children. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation annually compiles a “Dirty Dozen”⁸ list to identify highly-used technology company platforms, tools, and applications that present detrimental and substantial risks to children and to explain how they proliferate and enable online child exploitation. In December 2022, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report⁹ that examined the increasing “volume, complexity, and danger of sexual exploitation of children online . . . [and that addressing] the issue is a formidable task amid a digital landscape characterized by increasing online access, advances in technology, and increased use of encryption.” The GAO report recommended federal governmental efforts to address online exploitation of children, including a continual focus on our National Strategy to combat exploitation of children.¹⁰

Likewise, the U.S. Department of Justice has recognized that “underlying every sexually explicit image or video of a child is abuse, rape, molestation, and/or exploitation,” The production of CSAM creates a permanent record of the child’s victimization,” which in some cases has led to a child’s suicide and always leads to lasting psychological and/or physical trauma.¹¹ This includes livestreaming and virtual child sex trafficking with an expansive customer base through domestic and international access to profits from child victims.¹² Media reports have cited well over 29.3 million CSAM in 2021.¹³

⁸ <https://endsexualexploitation.org/dirtydozenlist-2023/>

⁹ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-23-105260.pdf>

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-06/child_sexual_abuse_material_2.pdf

¹² https://www.justice.gov/d9/2023-06/livestreaming_and_virtual_child_sex_trafficking_2.pdf

¹³

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/24/sites-reported-record-293m-child-abuse-images-in-2021>.

Studies have concluded that to counteract online child sexual abuse, it is essential to design effective strategies, since the internet is a hub of online sexual abuse activities.¹⁴ While some have attempted to document the prevalence of sex trafficking of children and adolescents in the United States, it is generally known that much of the exploitation and trafficking go largely undocumented and data can be hard to find, despite efforts by enforcement authorities and nonprofit entities to combat these realities.

AEHT's Ongoing Efforts and Current Focus

AEHT publishes a monthly newsletter, *Stop Trafficking!*,¹⁵ to address issues and trends that predominate and facilitate human trafficking. Our most recent issue is the first of a two-part publication discussing how the online environment can facilitate the grooming of children for sexual exploitation and trafficking. The full text of our publication is attached in the Appendix for your reference. Some of the key points include:

- We recognize that since the beginning of social media, child sexual exploitation has become one of the biggest challenges for tech companies.
- The internet has revolutionized the way traffickers groom and recruit potential victims.
- Traffickers often use covert communication when advertising or selling their victims. These posts carry hidden meanings understood only by those involved in the buying and selling of children.
- Children are especially vulnerable to grooming by traffickers online. Their brains undergo a shift around age 10, which encourages them to seek social rewards, especially attention and peer approval.
- Trafficking can be hard to recognize, especially for those being groomed or trafficked.

¹⁴

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sana-Ali-13/publication/352120820_Child_Sexual_Abuse_and_the_Internet-A_Systematic_Review/links/63d8ef10c465a873a271c159/Child-Sexual-Abuse-and-the-Internet-A-Systematic-Review.pdf?sq%5B0%5D=started_experiment_milestone&sq%5B1%5D=started_experiment_milestone&origin=journalDetail&rtd=e30%3D

¹⁵ The January 2024 issue is available at:

https://alliancetoendhumantrafficking.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024_1-Stop-Trafficking-EN.pdf

- Livestreaming child sexual exploitation (LCSE) routinely takes place online.

There are three types of LCSE:

- **Child self-generated**, which occurs when a trafficker coerces a child to engage in sexually-explicit conduct on a live stream, usually from a child's bedroom or bathroom.
- **Offender streaming**, which occurs when a perpetrator, often a family member or friend, sexually abuses a child in person while live-streaming the abuse to viewers. The viewers typically do not know each other, and they often participate by requesting that specific sex acts be committed.
- **Virtual child sex trafficking**, which is when offenders pay to watch while another offender sexually abuses a child in person, or offenders pay a victim directly to create self-generated CSAM.

Our Recommendations for How Congress Can Act Now to Protect Children

AEHT supports each of the bipartisan bills to help stop the exploitation of children online. While technology can serve as a helpful tool for accessing information, the dangers for children are too complex and too risky for them to navigate alone.

Congress can and should enact federal requirements for technology companies to protect children from human trafficking and to be held accountable when trafficking and other exploitation occurs as facilitated by the platforms, tools, and applications they offer.

We encourage the Committee to remain steadfast in maintaining key components of the legislation and to consider our recommendations for its legislative constructs:

- (1) **Technology companies should be required to do more to prevent, detect, and report human trafficking.** Despite the known risk to children, technology companies have failed to sufficiently expose, combat, and stop CSAM and human trafficking on their platforms, tools, and applications. Despite public

accounts from victims and survivors, governmental and private research and studies, media reports, and documented cases of exploitation and trafficking, technology companies persist in conducting business as usual. Although companies are aware of the ongoing instances of abuse and trafficking taking place on their platforms and applications, there has been no sense of urgency to-date to change their business practices and processes. The time is ripe for new and urgent responses by these companies to stop enabling abuse and trafficking of our Nation's youth.

- (2) **Technology companies cannot and should not be immune from liability when children are harmed through the products, platforms, tools, and applications they offer.** For an extended period, technology companies have benefited from the “section 230”¹⁶ immunity, originally implemented to foster the Internet's development and to facilitate the exchange of information without holding companies accountable for content and actions on their platforms, tools, and applications. However, the days of the “early Internet” are over and technology companies can no longer claim that they do not have the resources to combat CSAM and human trafficking that their platforms, tools, and applications facilitate. It is time for a fresh approach to stimulate technology companies to act to protect children online.

A Congressional Research Report¹⁷ noted that “[c]ourts have interpreted Section 230¹⁸ to foreclose a wide variety of lawsuits and to preempt laws that would make providers and users liable for third-party content. For example, the law has been applied to protect online service providers like social media companies from lawsuits based on their decisions to transmit or take down user-generated content.” This is crucial to note because it is recognized that technology companies do, in fact, possess the ability to and routinely do take down

¹⁶ *Id.* at fn 6.

¹⁷ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46751>

¹⁸ 47 U.S.C. 230. Section 230 was enacted as part of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 and amended the Communications Act of 1934. This provision provides federal immunity to technology companies for information provided by another person (i.e., a technology user).

user-generated content. Despite this reality, CSAM and human trafficking still proliferate online. **Congress should remove the long-standing immunity protection that technology companies enjoy while child victims experience harm and trauma without recourse against the companies that facilitated their abuse and trafficking.**

- (3) **Algorithms that are used to direct content to children should be transparent and made public. Proactive detection algorithms that analyze content and online behavior should be used to identify CSAM and potential online trafficking.** Knowing how technology companies direct traffic, content, advertisements, and make online connections to children should be readily accessible for parents, guardians, educators, and others who need this information to evaluate the quality of protections available by platform. By making algorithms publicly available, consistency and best practices can be promoted across platforms as they continue to strive to keep pace with changing patterns and trends that evolve and place children at risk.
- (4) **Children should be able to restore their dignity and seek compensation from those who facilitate or are directly responsible for the harm they suffer. This includes having the right to demand that CSAM be removed from platforms and applications and not be subject to continuing distribution.** AEHT believes that children and their parents or guardians should be able to seek recourse from technology companies when they are harmed. Likewise, children and their guardians should have the right to request – and to require the technology companies to act within a mandated time frame – to remove CSAM from platforms and applications. **While guidelines can allow for successful prosecution of the individuals involved, we encourage Congress to establish a process for requests to remove CSAM and timeframes for doing so.**

- (5) **Technology companies should be required to conduct independent audits or to deploy tools that identify potential CSAM or instances of suspected human trafficking. When identified, reports to law enforcement should be made.** Technology companies have become accustomed to policing certain activities that take place on their platforms, tools, and applications, (e.g., “fact checks,” “community notes,” de-platforming users, “shadow banning” users) while allowing CSAM and trafficking to be largely unchecked and eliminated. The ability exists for technology companies to do more to stop CSAM and human trafficking.
- (6) **Encrypted technologies and messaging should not be available to minors.** As technology evolves, the use of encryption is becoming more commonplace. This allows communications to take place via a confidential and unbreakable stream. AEHT members continue to express concern that the adoption of these encryption technologies may be embraced by abusers and traffickers, providing them the means to broaden their predatory activities targeting children without any means to observe, prevent, or detect CSAM, abuse, and trafficking. Therefore, minors should not have the capacity to engage with encrypted technologies in online environments.
- (7) **Parents should have the ability to approve with whom children are connecting online.** Technology companies should develop processes to permit parental oversight.
- (8) **Victim-centered processes and procedures should be implemented to help survivors of human trafficking. Technology personnel must comprehend the impact on children and adults who are subjects of CSAM and those who have been trafficked.** Such understanding is necessary for these professionals to grasp the repercussions of their business practices and policies on individuals. Only with such perspectives can survivors and companies collaborate to address this horrific problem. Moreover, technology companies

should be knowledgeable about referring victims to appropriate resources to aid in their recovery and healing from abuse and trafficking.

- (9) **Steps should be taken by technology companies to work with law enforcement.** Through accountability and public exposure of bad actors and their methods, only then can deterrence begin.
- (10) **Increased funding should be available for the National Human Trafficking Hotline and other reporting mechanisms.**

Countering the Arguments Against Protecting Children

The technology companies have offered a three-pronged argument for opposing federal legislation on this topic. Essentially, their positions to date are that: (1) individual's freedom of speech would be negatively impacted; (2) individual's privacy would be compromised; and (3) encryption technologies cannot be broken and thus they cannot be held responsible for information that is encrypted. Our responses below summarize why these arguments are misleading.

Individual Freedom of Speech Will Not Be Negatively Impacted

It is perplexing that technology firms would argue that safeguarding children online through impending legislation would compromise online freedom of speech. This assertion distorts the fundamental principles of our First Amendment rights. While the protection of freedom of speech is vital, it is not without limits. Legal precedent has already established boundaries on the types of speech that warrant protection. The audacity of technology companies in making such a claim is truly astonishing.

With political preferences aside, it is well-known that technology companies "deplatformed" and continue to either censor, amend through "community notes," or

“shadowban” certain opinions and voices on their platforms. It is well-known that the then-popular Parler application was removed from users’ availability following the 2020 election; and many voices with differing opinions or real-life experiences about COVID-19, governmental lockdown strategies during the pandemic, and many other topics have been either suppressed or deplatformed by the technology companies as disinformation or misinformation. While we offer no opinion on the validity of any of the political opinions expressed or that wish to be expressed online, the mere fact that technology companies *already police content expressed on their platforms, tools, and applications* obliterates their assertion that they are somehow concerned about free speech. More importantly, there is no legal or moral precedent that remotely provides protection for criminal acts involving CSAM, human trafficking, and online abuse of children. Therefore, freedom of speech has nothing to do with protecting innocent children online.

Individual’s Privacy Will Not Be Compromised

Technology companies have asserted that online privacy can be negatively affected if they are required to police images and content that is shared online. This is a misnomer; as noted above, technology companies have the technological ability and tools to scan and detect CSAM and potential human trafficking. No adult possesses a right to privacy for creating, distributing, possessing, engaging in, or profiting from CSAM and human trafficking.

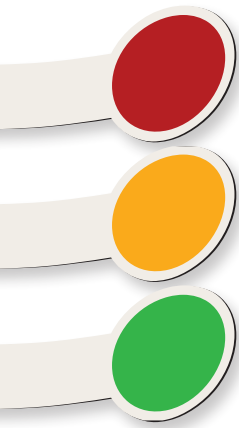
Encryption Technologies Exist and Should Be Appropriately Dealt with by Technology Companies

We noted above our specific recommendations for federal legislation and encryption, which include barring children from encrypted messaging solutions without parental consent. The current technological landscape already offers a number of encrypted messaging options, and technology companies have been paving the way for encryption as a way to protect online data for some time. However, encryption solutions

should not be deployed online without careful consideration about the negative consequences that can result for our Nation's youth. Nefarious actors, pedophiles, and traffickers can avail themselves of encryption to hide CSAM and human trafficking. Guardrails should be put in place by Congress to protect children from a technology tool that can be used to exploit and traffick them.

**Alliance to End Human Trafficking
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Appendix



Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

Anti-Human Trafficking Newsletter • January 2024 • Vol. 22 • No. 1

FOCUS: This month's newsletter is the first of two newsletters to focus on the grooming and trafficking of children on social media.

In the years since the beginning of social media, child sexual exploitation has become one of the biggest challenges facing tech companies. The internet has revolutionized the way traffickers groom and recruit potential victims. Every year, more and younger children are given sometimes unmonitored access to devices that connect them to the internet. Children are especially vulnerable to exploitation as their brains prompt them to seek social rewards, including attention and peer approval. Perpetrators who otherwise would not have contact with children can easily and instantaneously connect online with potential victims anywhere in the world.

Recruitment Using Social Media

Traffickers use social media platforms and chat rooms used by children and teens, usually creating fake profiles (catfishing) or pretending to be someone the child knows, to target and groom child victims for sex trafficking.

The process of grooming and recruiting victims online for exploitation involves several stages.

The perpetrators look for children who appear vulnerable by what they post on social media or gaming communities. Research conducted by the United Kingdom's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that children who share feelings of vulnerability on social media are at higher risk of being targeted and groomed by perpetrators online.

The perpetrator initiates contact with the potential victim, usually using a fake identity or profile, and builds a rapport with the child. The perpetrator will create a sense of friendship or love relationship.

Traffickers may promise desirable items such as games, toys, gadgets, or clothing to entice the child and strengthen the bond.

The perpetrators understand the child's vulnerabilities, telling them what they want to hear to gain their trust. Some examples of how a trafficker may respond to a child or teen's vulnerability include:

Victim expresses:

Feeling misunderstood

Feeling of inadequacy with appearance, etc.

Lack of freedom

Trafficker's Response:

I understand you

You are beautiful/I am proud of you

You are mature for your age and can make your own choices

Children will sometimes have two accounts on a social media platform; one they show their parents if their parents check their phones, and one they do not.



Awareness

Once gaining their trust, the predator may request or exchange explicit images or videos with children, often starting with innocent conversations and gradually escalating to more explicit content. Once the predator obtains compromising material, they can use it to manipulate and blackmail the child, sometimes called “sextortion,” into further exploitation or money from the child by threatening to release the images or information. This type of grooming can occur on virtually any online platform, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Kik, Tinder, and Ask. Fm.

Some traffickers may introduce the child to a group or online community where exploitation is normalized, and other children are already involved. Through manipulation and the desire to fit in, the perpetrator coerces the child into engaging in sexual activities or agreeing to meet offline.

In some cases, traffickers use the grooming tactic of asking children to do “dares” that escalate into sexual activity online. For example, traffickers may begin to dare children to perform sexual behaviors, from removing clothes to increasingly sexual demands to engaging in sexual acts online. This material may then be used to coerce the child to meet the perpetrator in person, threatening to expose the images if they refuse. Once the child and the perpetrator meet in person, they are coerced to engage in commercial sex acts, with the trafficker threatening to expose the images if the child refuses to comply.

Using artificial intelligence, fake images or videos can be created from content posted on social media sites and used to extort victims.

In cases of labor trafficking, the trafficker will post a fake job listing on job boards to attract potential victims. The trafficker will ask the potential victims to post their application online and conduct an interview, often acquiring personal information such as social security numbers, later using them for identity theft. Often, they entice the victim to leave their home country for a job overseas.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Selling Children on Social Media

Traffickers often use covert communication when advertising or selling their victims. This may include coded language, hidden messages, emojis, or encrypted messaging to conceal their activities. Encryption is a technology that protects information by converting it into unreadable code that cannot be deciphered easily by unauthorized people.

These posts carry hidden meanings understood only by those involved in trafficking. Traffickers often post publicly without arousing suspicion while facilitating the selling of children.

Traffickers may also share social media accounts or profiles with others in their trafficking network to sell children.

Traffickers also communicate and are paid covertly when they commit the crime of “virtual child sex trafficking,” which occurs when an offender in the United States sends a digital payment to a trafficker in another country. The trafficker will sexually abuse a child in front of a web camera while the offender in the United States watches a livestream of the abuse.

Traffickers will use live video streaming services and platforms to broadcast sexual abuse or exploitation of child victims in real-time. These streams are available to viewers who pay for access or belong to a closed group or forum via social media with the traffickers. Within these closed spaces online, traffickers can also share information about potential victims, exchange contact details, negotiate deals, and watch online child sexual abuse at a distance. Child sexual abuse, depicting the rape of infants and toddlers, bondage, humiliation through sexual assault, including self-mutilation, youth-on youth abuse, and child-on-child abuse, as well as bestiality, are not uncommon.

Finally, online child sex offenders are increasingly moving to the Dark Web. The Dark Web is a series of anonymous networks that prevent the use of traditional means to detect, investigate, and

Younger and younger children are being targeted “on an industrial scale” by internet groomers. In 2021, there was a three-fold increase in imagery showing 7–10 year olds targeted and groomed by internet predators.

(https://enough.org/stats_exploitation)

prosecute online child sexual exploitation offenses. The sites often expand rapidly. One site obtained 200,000 new members within its first four weeks of operation. Some sites require users to pay a fee to gain access, generally using cryptocurrency payments, commercializing the abuse suffered by victims whose images are trafficked. Others require new or prospective members to provide newly produced Child Sexual Abuse Material, pushing offenders further into their abuse of children. Though these sites sit within the Dark Web, they are readily accessible to anyone.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Children's Brains and Social Media

Children are especially vulnerable to grooming by traffickers online. Children's brains undergo a fundamental shift starting around ten years old, which compels them to seek social rewards, especially attention and peer approval. Receptors for the "happy hormones" oxytocin and dopamine multiply in a part of the preteen brain, which makes them extra sensitive to attention and admiration from others. A dopamine and oxytocin rush occurs whenever the child experiences a "social reward" such as attention or a "like" from a friend. Therefore, classmates, friends, or people they have never met can deliver or withhold rewards in the form of "likes," views, and follows. The public nature of the internet also plays a role in the experience of "social reward."

This makes any child posting online vulnerable to bullying, exploitation, grooming, and trafficking.

Social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Snapchat have been increasingly linked to mental health problems, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and body image concerns.

Adults may also experience this sense of reward when on social media. Still, they usually have a sense of selfhood that relies less on feedback from others, and they can usually better regulate their emotional responses.

Traffickers will create accounts impersonating their victims and often spread lies or rumors about them on social media, referred to as "outing." Traffickers will also use social media to stalk victims, even when they can escape the life. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Signs of Human Trafficking in Youth

Trafficking can be hard to recognize, especially for the people being groomed or trafficked. You can help keep children and teens safe by paying attention to changes in their behavior, such as:

- Avoiding you, friends, and family and having new friends they met online or older friends
- Frequent tardiness or absence from school or work- some children and teens are victimized after school or when they should be in school
- Sleeping often when they're home and staying out late or all weekend—many child victims of sex trafficking still live at home
- Loss of interest in things they once enjoyed
- Having or bragging about money, expensive items, or traveling with no reasonable explanation
- Starting to use drugs or alcohol
- Frequent injuries with no reasonable explanation
- Having secret online accounts- Children sometimes have two accounts on a social media platform. One, they show their parents if they check their phones; one, they do not.

These may be signs of human trafficking or peer bullying, or they could struggle with mental health and difficulties at home or school. This list is not inclusive.

Advocacy

Social Media Safety for Kids

Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center recommends that the most effective way to keep your kids safe online is to become more involved with the youth's online world. Warn them that someone might pretend to be a friend and be a trafficker, how traffickers target their victims, and red flags to watch out for.

Encourage them to speak with you if they feel uncomfortable or unsure about an online interaction or if anyone asks them for personal information.

Educate them on the dangers of "oversharing" online. Remind them that social media is not a personal photo album, and that people online are not always who they say they are.

Warn the child to refrain from posting information such as their full name, date of birth, contact number, or address.

Also, warn the child never to post pictures they would not want the world to see and never share the places or times of where you will be going nor add friends they do not know. Using Artificial Intelligence, traffickers can post fake images or videos from content posted on the child's social media sites.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

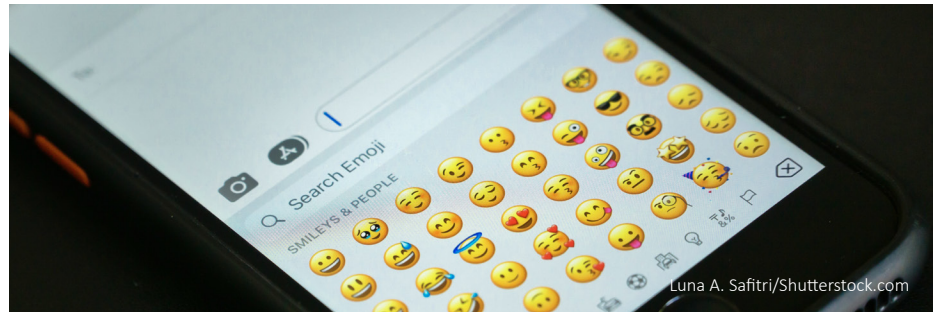


The Hidden Language

Children and teens use emojis as complete sentences; many have meanings unknown to many adults. The website Gabb recommends always considering the context when viewing an emoji.

Does a victory sign mean a team won a soccer game, or is it intended to be a vagina? A bowl of noodles could be a request for a naked photo, and broccoli sometimes means marijuana. Emojis of food, expressions, and parts of the body form the foundation of explicit and drug-related language.

Recognizing emojis' possible meanings is necessary to help keep children away from potential perpetrators. Please click [here](#) to access an Emoji meaning chart.



Recommendations for Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms often have policies and mechanisms in place to combat trafficking activities, which include collaborating with law enforcement to identify and apprehend offenders involved in the sex trafficking of children.

All social media platforms use algorithms, which are designed to determine the type of content that users see on their feeds or timelines. The algorithms collect data about users' behaviors, actions, and preferences based on the accounts they follow, the content they engage with, their search history, and demographic details, and these can be used to detect human trafficking and sex trafficking of children while ensuring the right to privacy.

Social media platforms can also develop proactive detection algorithms. These algorithms can analyze content and user behavior to identify patterns suggestive of child sexual exploitation.

Additionally, platforms should establish easily accessible reporting mechanisms that enable users to report content or activities that are suspected of child trafficking or exploitation. Moreover, anonymous reporting options encourage users to report suspicious activities without reluctance or fear.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Livestreaming Child Sexual Exploitation (LCSE)

Livestreaming on social media has become extremely popular among children and adolescents. Livestreaming allows a user to produce real-time video broadcasted over an online social media platform, whether viewed publicly or by a restricted audience. Live.me and Omegle are among the most popular platforms for livestreaming, along with livestreaming capabilities on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, and Twitch. Most platforms have a chat feature where users can interact with viewers of their content.

Livestreaming child sexual exploitation (LCSE) occurs when a perpetrator coerces a child victim to engage in sexually explicit conduct in real-time to one or more viewers.

There are generally three types of LCSE: child “self-generated,” offender-streaming, and virtual child sex trafficking. Child “self-generated” exploitation occurs when the trafficker coerces a child to engage in sexually explicit conduct on a live stream, usually from the child’s bedroom or a bathroom.

Offender-streaming exploitation occurs when a perpetrator, usually a family member or friend, sexually abuses a child in person while livestreaming the abuse to viewers. The viewers typically do not know each other, and they often participate in the activity by requesting that specific sex acts be committed.

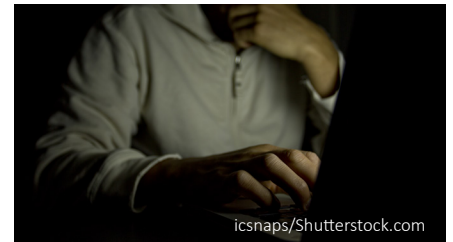
Finally, virtual child sex trafficking is when offenders pay to watch while another offender sexually abuses a child in person or offenders pay a victim directly to create “self-generated” Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). Because of the interactive nature of live-streaming platforms, offenders can request specific sexual abuse acts for an additional cost. Payment is usually made digitally. This offense often involves offenders in the United States and facilitators and children in foreign countries. Children may be transported from rural areas of that foreign country to urban settings to fulfill the demand.

The trauma caused by LCSE and other forms of online child exploitation is compounded by the victim’s knowledge that documentation of their abuse will live on the internet in perpetuity. Victims of online child sexual abuse must receive robust, ongoing victim services to aid in their healing.

[IJM Summary Report Online Sexual Exploitation of Children](#)

Over the past three months, law enforcement was not able to investigate nearly 100,000 IP addresses that are known to be downloading and sharing CSAM due to limited resources.

*Senate Judiciary Hearing,
Feb. 14, 2023*



*CD9 – Code 9: Parents in Room
KPC – Keeping Parents Clueless*

Parents can go to several websites to decipher what their teen is saying on their cell phone text messages or social media sites. Please click [here](#) to access Text Lingo: Secret Language of Teens for an up to date list of their coded language.



Advocacy

Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is a criminal offense. Image-based sexual abuse includes the creation, theft, extortion, threatened or actual distribution, or any use of sexualized or sexually explicit materials without the consent of the person depicted.

Sexting is the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages and nude or partially nude images via cell phone, which an estimated 40 percent of teens engage in. Sexts may be sent as regular text messages through apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp or online games. Sexting, when involving minors, is legally classified as child sexual abuse, which is a serious federal crime in the United States. It is illegal to produce, possess, or distribute any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor.

Teens may “sext” for a variety of reasons, and some may feel pressured into sexting by online or offline boyfriends or girlfriends who may threaten to break up with them if they don’t send a picture. They often rationalize that sending photos to one person won’t hurt.

Unfortunately, many teens discover that someone they sent a sext to has forwarded that image to others without their knowledge. The consequences can be academically, socially, and emotionally devastating. Sexting usually violates school policy. The image may be seen by college admissions personnel or by potential employers. In some cases, the teen is charged for sending nude photos.

Image-based sexual abuse, sometimes referred to as ‘revenge porn,’ may be shared on specialized ‘revenge porn’ websites, on social media, via email, text, or messaging services, or shared with specific individuals, such as the victim’s family, classmates, or employers. The images may also be shared offline. Sharing pictures or videos that have been photoshopped or otherwise altered in any way may also be considered image-based sexual abuse.

Consent is required at two stages: when the image or video is taken and again when it is shared with any third party. In the case of sexting, the person freely shares the pictures of themselves but is usually unaware that the images have then been shared or may not give consent to the photos being shared. Even in cases of self-generated explicit materials, it is never the victim’s fault when their trust is broken and they are abused.

In some cases, the first level of consent is missing. For instance, the victim may have been unaware the image was taken, coerced into sharing the image, or the perpetrator may have stolen or hacked the image.

At times, the images are used to blackmail those depicted or to coerce them to send more sexually explicit photos. The perpetrator may threaten to harm your friends or relatives by using the images or other information they have obtained from you unless you comply with their demands. This is referred to as sextortion. Globally, sextortion has become a serious threat to young people. Adolescents are more susceptible to sextortion because of their developmental stage. They take more risks, struggle to control their impulses and desires, and are more easily swayed by peer pressure.

Child sextortion is becoming increasingly common—as far back as 2016, the U.S. Justice Department identified it as “the most important and fastest-growing cyberthreat to children.” According to Enough is Enough, ninety percent of sextortion victims are teenage boys. Please click [here](#) to view their webinar on *Sex Trafficking in the United States: What every parent needs to know*. Boys are significantly less likely to tell their parents they are victims of sextortion than girls. Moreover, LGBTQ+ teens are more than twice as likely to be victims of sextortion as their heterosexual and gender-conforming peers.

Moreover, a “fake hacker” may claim that they have hacked into your child’s device and found inappropriate sexual images. They will demand money or more images.

Other forms of image-based sexual abuse may include the non-consensual use of a person’s images for the creation of photoshopped/artificial pornography or sexualized materials intended to portray a person, referred to as “cheap fake” or “deepfake” pornography. Also, IBSA includes the non-consensual recording of images or videos, including so-called “down blousing,” “upskirting,” or secret recordings in places such as restrooms and dressing rooms.

No one is free from the threat of IBSA.

Solutions must include stronger legislation, avenues for victims to sue in civil litigation, online platform responsibility to remove non-consensual explicit imagery swiftly, and survivor-centered removal forms. The laws regarding image-based sexual abuse vary from country to country.

For more information, please click [here](#).



How can YOU impact policy change?

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) publishes a “Dirty Dozen List” each year, a campaign exposing twelve mainstream entities that enable and even promote and profit from sexual abuse and exploitation.

In 2023, all twelve were tech platforms involved in some way in facilitating the sexual exploitation of children and adults. NCOSE offers numerous opportunities for action anyone can take to advocate for and impact policy change with these platforms.

In past years, this campaign has yielded major victories at Google, Netflix, TikTok, Verizon, and many more.

Please find a brief description below of social media platforms and action alerts to which you can respond.

- Please click [here](#) to express concern with the rampant number of adults grooming minors for sexual abuse online and Discord’s lack of robust safety features that allow such abuse to not only happen regularly but actively thrive in Discord’s environment.
- Please click [here](#) to insist Instagram prioritizes child safety!
- Please click [here](#) to tell Reddit to delete all images of sexual violence from its platform.
- With Apple’s nearly limitless resources, there can be no excuse for the deception of consumers and caregivers on such a massive scale: age ratings and descriptions mislead parents about the content, risks, and dangers to children on available apps. Please click [here](#) to urge Apple to fix its app age ratings.
- Tell Snapchat to step up child safety measure by clicking [here](#).

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Bark scans your child’s text messages, 30+ social media apps, web browsers, emails, and other online activity, keeping you informed, and your child protected. Bark can also help you manage screen times, block websites and apps with inappropriate content, and track location.

Danger Warning! Social Media and Sex Trafficking Recruitment

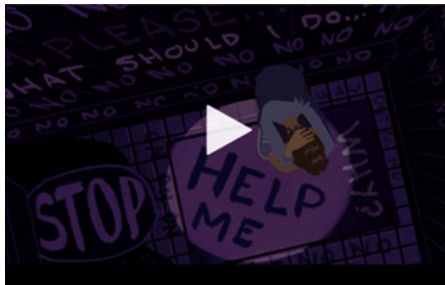
Social media is increasingly being exploited to contact, recruit, and sell children and youth for sex. Some traffickers use online ads to target victims, or they will send friend/follow requests to young people in their region, proceed to strike up a conversation and develop online friendships. These conversations may start friendly and innocent, but then the traffickers will begin to use manipulation to charm their potential victims. The online friendship quickly evolves into a romantic relationship, and this is where the sextortion techniques are used to lure their victims into human trafficking.

Please click [here](#) to view this webinar sponsored by Survive and Thrive in affiliation with Big Bend Coalition Against Human Trafficking and the International Rescue Committee.

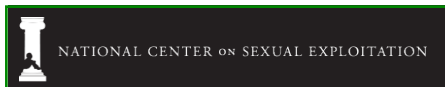
With the fall 2023 iOS update, Apple added a feature to automatically blur images and videos containing nudity for children 12 and under in iMessage, FaceTime, AirDrop, and Photos Picker. This tool is also available for teens and adults as an opt-in feature. Previously, this blurring feature had to be turned on by parents, was unavailable to anyone over 13, only detected still images, and only worked in iMessage.



Action



Please click [here](#) to view a short video by the Blue Campaign of “Mia” meeting her trafficker over social media and being groomed.



Please click [here](#) to view video resources by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation on the impact of social media on child abuse, pornography, sexual violence and human trafficking.



When the Surgeon General issued an advisory on smoking in 1964, it became a priority to regulate Big Tobacco companies for the sake of public health. Now, we’re facing a new crisis: social media’s impact on the mental health and safety of kids. It must now be a priority to regulate Big Tech to protect our children’s mental and emotional health - even their very lives. Please click [here](#) to view this 30 second PSA.

Sign the Petition to Show You Support John Doe

When John Doe was 13 years old, he was exploited by sex traffickers into creating sexually explicit images, which were later posted on Twitter. Twitter refused to remove or block the content depicting the sexual exploitation of John Doe, who was clearly and demonstratively a minor and continued to profit from its distribution knowingly.

It is on behalf of John Doe and countless other survivors like him that the National Center on Sexual Exploitation Law Center, along with The Haba Law Firm and The Matiasic Law Firm, has brought a lawsuit against Twitter.

Please click [here](#) to sign the petition in support of John Doe and all children exploited online.

Steps to Protect Children

Survive and Thrive recommends the following measures to help protect your children. Check the kids’ devices frequently and thoroughly, including activity, messages, and contacts. Set appropriate parental control, such as age restrictions for downloading apps and time restrictions. At times, the child may have two separate accounts on a social media site. Be sure to check for the second site.

Educate yourself on how cybercrimes occur against children for sexual purposes. Once the online methods and tactics traffickers use are known, it is easier to detect signs of online exploitation.

Most importantly, maintain a trustful relationship with your children. While safety features are helpful, you should rely more on your relationship with them than filters and other safeguards. Also, a child’s safety is more important than their privacy. This is not a trust issue; it is a desire to love and protect your child.



24-Hour Call Center:

To report information about a missing or exploited child call our 24-Hour Call Center:

1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

Report child sexual exploitation online at [CyberTipline.org](https://www.cyberTipline.org).



ALLIANCE TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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