

Chapter 33

Web-Based Child Sexual Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Use of social media and other technologies like phone- and computer-based cameras is widespread among both youth and young adults in the U.S. Yet, these technologies also present opportunities for child victimization and exploitation. Unlike forms of exploitation that occur in a face-to-face context, these crimes are difficult to detect and more so to prosecute. Offenders and victims may not even reside in the same country. This chapter defines online child sexual exploitation, describes the law regarding these activities, details what is known about victims and offenders, and highlights current efforts towards prevention and intervention. Challenges in detection and prosecution are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Use of technology including smartphones and social media is extremely common among youth. In a 2018 poll by the Pew Research Center, 85% of teens ages 13 to 17 reported that they used YouTube (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In the same poll, 72% of teens reported using Instagram, 69% reported using Snapchat, 51% reported using Facebook, and 32% reported using Twitter. Use of web-based technology among juveniles increased sharply in recent years. In 2015, about three-quarters of teens had a smartphone or access to a smartphone (Lenhart, 2015). In 2018, more than 95% of teens had a smartphone or easy access to one (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). About 88% had access to a desktop or other form of home computer. Social media use has also evolved. In 2015, Facebook was the most common social media platform used by teens (Lenhart, 2015). In 2018, Snapchat became more popular among teens, though Facebook use remained more common among low-income youth (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Teens today use a variety of social media and other web-based platforms to communicate, learn more about the world, and entertain themselves (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Lenhart, 2015). Teens also spend a substantial portion of their time online. In 2018, 45% of teens reported that they were nearly constantly online (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). That figure was only 24% in 2015 (Lenhart, 2015).

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Unfortunately, use of social media and other technologies can place teens and other juveniles at risk for sexual exploitation. One example is sexting, a trend that has grown in popularity among youth. Across 39 studies, an average of 15% of juveniles reported sending a sexually explicit text message to someone (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). More than a quarter, 27%, reported receiving a sexually explicit text message. Once sent, juveniles risk having the sext forwarded to other juveniles or adults, or posted online, without their consent. Roughly 12% of juveniles reported forwarding sexts without consent (Madigan et al., 2018). In some cases, commonly termed revenge porn, the forwarded content is used to bully, embarrass, or intimidate the youth involved.

The web can also be used as a tool to engage in other forms of child sexual exploitation, such as child pornography or child prostitution. This chapter explores this topic with the following objectives:

- Define child sexual exploitation and its various web-based forms
- Detail the state, Federal, and international laws prohibiting child sexual exploitation
- Outline what is known about victims and offenders
- Describe current initiatives to prevent or detect web-based child sexual exploitation

Additionally, this chapter describes difficulties in prosecution and detection as well as areas where further investigation is needed.

DEFINING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines the term exploitation as “the act of taking advantage of something; esp., the act of taking unjust advantage of another for one’s own benefit.” Since the definition is vague, many activities involving children (youth under age 18) can be classified as criminal exploitation, including sexual abuse and rape. Many examples in this chapter fall under the category of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). CSEC refers to sexual exploitation of children for either financial benefit or in exchange for items or services that hold a value of some sort. Examples of CSEC and other forms of child sexual exploitation that can be facilitated through the web include:

- Child pornography production and distribution
- Child prostitution
- Transporting children for the purpose of prostitution (also termed sex trafficking)
- Webcam child sex tourism (WCST)
- Online child sexual exploitation (OCSE)

These terms can be somewhat confusing since countries and other sources sometimes disagree on definitions. Additionally, some forms of CSEC can occur in person while others require no face-to-face contact.

Child Pornography

In the U.S., Federal law defines child pornography as “any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor.” (Department of Justice, 2015c) Child pornography can come in many forms including

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