

# Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 on the Child Sexual Abuse Threat

NAC(20)206

OFFICIAL

April 2020

## Summary

1. This brief considers the impact of measures implemented both domestically and internationally to slow the spread of COVID-19 on the child sexual abuse (CSA) threat.
2. This is an update to NAC(20)199 Impact of COVID-19 on the CSA Threat.

## Key Judgements

3. It is **likely** that increased levels of boredom, which in some instances leads to increased risk taking, will increase the number of children engaged in taking and sharing Self-Generated Indecent Images (SGII).
4. Despite a predicted rise in offending, it is a **realistic possibility** that there will not be an increase in the level of self-reporting until children return to education or have further interactions with support workers.
5. Given the time between the offence occurring and contact with professionals there is a **realistic possibility** that some offending will not be reported at all. This applies to both online and offline offending.
6. Offenders' access to children has **almost certainly** changed since the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions. Some offenders will have increased access to children, but this will depend on their current domestic situation; others will no longer have access to children.
7. It is a **realistic possibility** that due to reduced levels of moderation, new images and, therefore, some new abuse will go undetected.

## Intelligence

8. Since Monday 23 March 2020, the UK Government has instigated a number of restrictions to slow the spread of COVID-19. The population are to remain inside their homes unless they are key workers, are undertaking essential work that cannot be completed at home, to buy essential supplies, or to exercise once per day.
9. International travel to and from the UK has almost ceased. UK nationals are being repatriated on government chartered rescue flights or, where possible, on remaining commercial air routes.
10. Schools in the UK have been shut since Friday 20 March 2020. Provision has been made for the childcare of key workers, and for children who are deemed vulnerable. The number of vulnerable children accessing this service has reduced considerably.
11. Websites and applications continue to report increased traffic to their services. One live streaming social media application has reported a 300% increase in time spent viewing livestreams and a

60% increase in the number of global users . A number of gaming websites have also seen increases in usage with one application noting a 20% increase in users daily and another reporting 30-40% increases in daily use of the platform since restrictions where in place.

12. One gaming platform has seen the use of their platform increase and their user base are now spending 1.25bn hours on the platform per month which is an about a 20% increase.
13. Social media application moderators are now working from home where they have no capacity to review Indecent Images of Children (IIOC).
14. Between 19 March and 08 April 2020, Childline delivered 1,700 counselling sessions to children and young people who were concerned about COVID-19. Between 02 April and 08 April 2020, 363 counselling sessions were delivered that related to physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect and COVID-19.
15. The Lucy Faithful Foundation (LFF) operates the confidential child sexual abuse prevention helpline, Stop It Now!<sup>1</sup>. The helpline saw an initial 50% reduction in demand by mid-March, although the number of people using the anonymous message service to seek help rose. As the lockdown has continued, overall demand has also risen, from 227 calls<sup>2</sup> (of which 86 were missed) in the week ending 27 March 2020, to 502 (of which 259 missed) in the week ending 3 April 2020. (This compares with 2,429 calls (of which 1,440 missed) in the whole of January 2020, equating to 548 per week).

## Comment

### Online Offending

16. Selected industry partner reporting states that there has been no reduction in their ability to detect and report CSA, despite restrictions in their ability to work from the office or the increase in traffic to their sites and applications.
17. It is assessed that during lockdown less human moderation of content is being undertaken, and that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is being employed by a range of platforms to detect First Generation material.
18. It is **likely** that AI will have a lower detection rate than human moderation, and, due to restrictions, moderators will not be able to review the image to determine if the AI was correct. It is **highly likely** that these restrictions will apply to all platforms using AI to detect offending.
19. It is **likely** with low confidence that the quality and quantity of actionable reporting will be reduced as moderators do not have access to the same systems when working from home. Further analysis of incoming reports is being undertaken to determine the effects on reporting.
20. It is a **realistic possibility** that due to restrictions on moderation, new images and, therefore, new abuse will go undetected.
21. However, there has been an increase in the number of disseminations from the NCA's Child Sexual Exploitation Referrals Bureau (CSERB) to UK law enforcement over the two weeks from 23 March 2020. It is a **realistic possibility** that the increase in online activity across applications has increased levels of offending and, therefore, reporting.
22. Alternatively, prior to the restrictions, as referrals were below the average for dissemination, it is a **realistic possibility** that this increase was caused by amended priorities by National Centre of Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and CSERB due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Continued review of this trend is required to confirm these judgments. Due to the short timeframe of this increase, only low confidence judgments can be made at this time.

<sup>1</sup> LFF Helpline targets members of the public, but specifically:- sex offenders and potential offenders; family and friends worried about an adult with worrying sexual thoughts or behaviour; and parents and carers worried about the sexual behaviour of children and young people. These groups make up over 80% of all calls to the helpline.

<sup>2</sup> Calls includes contacts via anonymous message service, which represent some 5-10% of all contacts handled

23. School attendance dropped significantly by Tuesday 31 March 2020, a reduction of two thirds from the number of vulnerable children attending at the start of the restrictions. Only 6% of children who are deemed vulnerable and, therefore, eligible for schooling during this period are still attending school.
24. The number of children not attending school is **likely** to present a significant increase in the risk of sexual abuse. Software which analyses children’s language and behaviour<sup>3</sup> has reported that language with sexual connotations has risen in communication with children and is now encountered throughout the day when previously it was mainly in the evening. 13 years is the most likely age to engage in sexualised conversation for both genders, and reduced to 10 when just females. Given the increased time spent online and the increased sexual nature of conversation it is **highly likely** that there will be greater opportunities for offenders.
25. Academic opinion has identified the following vulnerabilities and behaviours (table 1) they believe will affect child victims during lockdown:

Vulnerabilities and Behaviours of Child Victims (Table 1)	
Vulnerabilities	Behaviours
Low self esteem	Prioritise others’ needs
Poor social skills	Social isolation
Psychological difficulties	Thrill seeking
Poor emotional regulation	Missing danger cues
Attachment difficulties	Poor problem solving ability

26. It is **likely** that increased levels of boredom can lead to increased risk taking among children and increase the number engaged in the taking and sharing of Self-Generated Indecent Images (SGII). It is a **realistic possibility** that peer pressure will encourage others to engage in this activity as it becomes more common place.
27. Increases in the number of children engaged in creating and sharing of SGII is **highly likely** to create additional opportunities for offenders to obtain IIOC and groom/blackmail children.
28. Increased reporting of CSA offences usually occurs once children return to education as the majority of reports come from professionals such as teachers and social workers. It is thus **unlikely** that there will be an increase in reporting until children return to education or have further interactions with support workers.
29. Given the time between the offence occurring and contact with professionals,<sup>4</sup> there is a **realistic possibility** that some offending will not be reported at all. This applies to both online and offline offending.
30. Publically available statistics on livestreaming confirm the judgment made in relation to the increased use of applications to communicate with others. It is **likely** that children will communicate with others outside their own social group as restrictions on movement and activity exhaust content to discuss. The same is **likely** true of interactions between people in the same household, reducing levels of adult supervision of children.
31. As set out in NAC(20)199<sup>5</sup> the use of new applications poses a risk to children who are not aware of their security or safeguarding features. There are a number of factors that make applications more attractive to offenders.

<sup>3</sup> Using a small data set.

<sup>4</sup> Professionals such as teachers and social workers make up the largest proportion of public reporting.

**Factors that Make Applications Attractive to Offenders (Table 2)**

Features	Reason
Connect with strangers	Applications that allow users to connect to strangers pose an increased risk as people beyond the user’s social group can contact and connect with children. This is prevalent in applications that allow users to see all other users of the application. Applications that are marketed on this basis pose the greatest risk.
Connections with other social media	New applications that allow you to sign up with an existing social media account put users at risk as they allow strangers access to other social media platforms through which to make contact. Often your “friends” on these applications can also be viewed or contacted.
One Point Verification	By connecting to other social media the application relies on another application’s verification process. This is less secure than two point verification and allows users to disguise their true identity.
Geo-location connections	Allowing users to connect with other users based on the their location puts children at risk and jeopardises their physical security.
Non-private chat	A feature that allows strangers to enter into communication with other users poses a considerable risk for grooming and obtaining indecent images. If a “lock” is required to be activated on the application, rather than being the default setting, this will increase the level of risk posed by the application.

32. Media reporting has indicated a number of instances globally where children have been exposed to indecent imagery when strangers have joined video calls on applications. It is a **realistic possibly** that offenders will seek to exploit distance learning tools to abuse children.

33. From law enforcement information, it has been determined that some offenders’ excessive consumption of legal adult material led them to become more curious about different forms of material as they progressively clicked through content and came across material (whether extreme or Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)) ‘accidentally’ and this would attract their interest.

34. It is assessed with low confidence that it is **highly likely** that the longer individuals increase the range of their viewing habits, the more extreme and frequent it can become, as they seek to maintain the same levels of sexual gratification.

35. Traffic to Pornhub is up by 19%<sup>6</sup> in the UK, it is **almost certain** that this is also true across other legal pornographic sites and illegal platforms hosting CSAM. It is a **realistic possibility** for some non-offenders to become offenders through increased use of pornography sites as some individuals continue to click through material, and gain exposure to content they might not otherwise have seen.

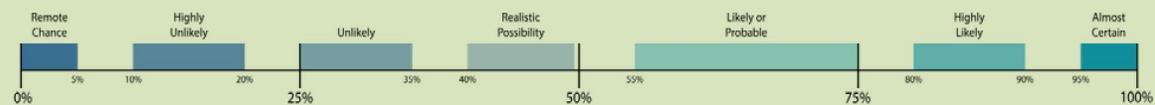
**Offline Offending**

<sup>5</sup> Impact of COVID-19 on the CSA Threat.

<sup>6</sup> [www.pornhub.co.uk/insight](http://www.pornhub.co.uk/insight)

36. Offenders’ access to children has **almost certainly** changed since the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions.
37. It is a realistic possibility that some offenders will have sole custody of their children as they are unable to live with a co-parent due to movement restrictions. It is a **realistic possibility** that this will allow them continuous access to their victim. It is unknown how many offenders this applies to. Alternatively, some children will be protected from offenders due to the presence of a non-offending parent in the family home.
38. It is assessed with low confidence that it is **likely** that some offenders will disregard the risks of offending. For some offenders, their sexual urges and desire for immediate gratification outweigh consideration of the associated serious risks<sup>7</sup>. These offenders will continue to seek opportunities to offend, such as during times when the other parent is absent.
39. It is **likely** that reporting of contact abuse will decrease. While the number of children contacting Childline about abuse and COVID-19 has increased, the number of children reporting contact abuse remains low compared to other concerns. It is likely that children who are subject to contact abuse within the family environment will find it difficult to make sensitive calls or have unsupervised access to the internet, and thus it is likely that such abuse will be under reported. Limited exposure to face to face contact with professionals such as teachers and social workers will **almost certainly** allow instances of abuse to go undetected or disclosed.
40. The same is also **likely** true for offenders and those who call with concerns about others. Anecdotally, callers comment on the lack of privacy to allow calls to be made from home; and also their pre-occupation with Covid-19 realities<sup>8</sup>. This is **highly likely** due to the lack of space and privacy to make contact from home. Contact to Stop in Now! has now returned to pre lockdown levels. It is **likely** that as offenders adapt to lockdown conditions they have obtained the necessary privacy or other requirements to make contact with Stop It Now!.

**Language of Probability:** Throughout this paper, language of probability is used which is defined by the Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment (PHIA) ‘Probability Yardstick’. The probability ranges for such terms are as follows:



**Confidence Statements**

**Where we have made judgements based on the intelligence provided, and used Language of Likelihood, we have provided accompanying confidence levels. These are described as follows:**

**High Confidence** - when there is good quality information or corroborating evidence from a range of different sources, or in situations where it is possible to make a clear judgement.

**Moderate Confidence** - when the evidence is open to various interpretations or is credible and plausible but lacks corroboration.

**Low Confidence** - when there is scant, or very fragmentary information or when sources are of suspect reliability.

<sup>7</sup> Loss of career, family, imprisonment.

<sup>8</sup> Other concerns of caller included health and mental health concerns, needs to get food and other supplies and worry about family finances

## Handling This Product

- Requests for dissemination beyond that permitted must be referred back to the NCA's National Assessment Centre ([nac@nca.gov.uk](mailto:nac@nca.gov.uk)), except for requests for disclosure to third parties under the Data Protection Act 2018 or Freedom of Information Act 2000, which must be referred to the NCA's Statutory Disclosure Team ([statutorydisclosureteam@nca.gov.uk](mailto:statutorydisclosureteam@nca.gov.uk))
- This report is supplied by the UK's NCA under s7(4) Crime and Courts Act 2013. It is exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It may be subject to exemptions under other UK legislation. Except where permitted by any accompanying handling instructions, this information must not be further disclosed without the NCA's prior consent, pursuant to Sch. 7, Part III Crime and Courts Act 2013.
- This paper may contain 'Sensitive Material' as defined in the Attorney General's guidelines for the disclosure of 'Unused Material' to the defence. Any sensitive material in this paper may be subject to Public Interest Immunity (PII). No part of this paper should be disclosed to the defence without prior consultation with the originator.

## Distribution List

This paper may be circulated as per the distribution list below to anyone in the recipient agency or department – unless explicitly stated otherwise – who is appropriately cleared and who has a legitimate 'need to know'.

### Internal NCA

All NCA departments

### Other UK

UK Police Forces  
 ACRO Criminal Records Office  
 Border Force  
 Cabinet Office  
 Crown Office and Procurator  
 Fiscal Service  
 Department for Justice (NI)  
 Department for International  
 Development  
 Department for Transport  
 Foreign and Commonwealth  
 Office  
 Home Office  
 HM Prison and Probation Service  
 HM Revenue and Customs  
 HM Treasury  
 JNAC UK/US/Canada EYES only  
 JTAC  
 Ministry of Defence (DCIA and  
 RAFP only)  
 National Cyber Security Centre  
 National Prison Intelligence  
 Coordination Centre  
 Public Prosecution Service for  
 Northern Ireland  
 UK Intelligence Agencies

### International

Australian Federal Police  
 Australian Crime and Intelligence  
 Commission  
 Australian Department of  
 Immigration and Border  
 Protection  
 AUS Office of National  
 Assessments  
 Agence des services frontaliers du  
 Canada  
 Canada Border Services Agency  
 Royal Canadian Mounted Police  
 New Zealand Customs  
 New Zealand Police  
 US Central Intelligence Agency  
 US Defense Intelligence Agency  
 US Drug Enforcement  
 Administration  
 US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,  
 Firearms and Explosives  
 US Federal Bureau of  
 Investigation  
 US Immigration & Customs  
 Enforcement  
 US National Security Agency  
 Europol  
 Interpol