

# Briefing from the Internet Watch Foundation

Westminster Hall Debate Tuesday 29 October 2024: Online Safety for Children and Young People

## **Key Asks:**

- 1. To highlight the growing threat of child sexual abuse online, referencing the latest statistics published by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF).
- 2. Ensure that child sexual abuse laws are updated in line with emerging harms, to prevent AI technology being exploited to create child sexual abuse imagery.
- 3. To advocate for ambitious, effective regulation of the Online Safety Act and to maintain pressure on tech companies to comply with the Act.

#### **About the Internet Watch Foundation**

The <u>Internet Watch Foundation</u> (IWF) is the official UK hotline for assessing and removing child sexual abuse material from the internet.

The IWF works closely in partnership with the internet industry, law enforcement, and governments globally to stop the repeated victimisation of people abused in childhood and make the internet a safer place, by detecting, removing and blocking illegal online child sexual abuse imagery.

### The scale of online child sexual abuse

To give you an idea of the scale of the problem, last year the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) assessed over 390,000 reports and confirmed over 275,000 web pages containing images or videos of children suffering sexual abuse, with each page containing hundreds, if not thousands, of indecent images of children.

The IWF report that 2023 was the 'most extreme' year on record, with more Category A child sexual abuse imagery discovered than ever before. 92% of the imagery discovered now shows "self-generated" child abuse where children are being targeted and groomed or coerced into sexual activities via webcams and devices with cameras.

For the first time, the IWF encountered and analysed over <u>2,400 images of sexual abuse involving children aged 3 to 6</u>. Of these images, 91% were of girls and mainly in domestic settings such as bedrooms and bathrooms. The abuse, which analysts have seen ranging from sexual posing to sadism, degradation, and even sexual acts with animals is directed by perpetrators and often recorded without the child's knowledge.

In August 2024, we released <u>new data</u> highlighting an exponential rise in sextortion scams. In the first six months of the year alone, reports of child sexual abuse linked to sexual extortion increased by 19% compared to the same period in 2023. <u>Boys are targeted most often in the reports</u> received by the IWF (91%), with analysts frequently

seeing evidence of boys being blackmailed by criminals looking to extort money. Three in five (60%) reports involved 16 and 17-year-olds.

# Al-generated child sexual abuse material

Artificial intelligence (AI) poses one of the biggest threats to online child safety in a generation. It's currently just too easy for criminals to use AI to generate and distribute sexually explicit content of children.

In October 2023, the IWF revealed the presence of over 20,000 Al-generated images on a dark web forum in one month where more than 3,000 depicted criminal child sexual abuse activities.

Since then, the issue has escalated and continues to evolve. In the past six months alone, <u>analysts at IWF have seen</u> a 6% increase in confirmed reports containing Algenerated child sexual abuse material, compared with the preceding 12 months. Almost all of the content (99%) was found on publicly available areas of the internet and was not hidden on the dark web.

The creation and distribution of AI generated child sexual abuse is already an offence under UK law. However, AI's capabilities have far outpaced our laws to the point at which paedophiles can now legally download the tools they need to generate images and can produce as many images as they want offline, with a high level of anonymity that can be achieved through open-source technology.

#### **Next steps and solutions**

With work underway to implement the Online Safety Act, it is imperative that this new legislation delivers ambitious, effective regulation to ensure platforms undertake necessary steps to combat child sexual abuse material online.

Further action by Government is also needed to tackle the escalating crisis of child sexual abuse online. Key measures should include:

- Preventing the distribution of Al-generated abuse imagery
- Ensuring that all online platforms proactively detect for child sexual abuse material where there is a risk, regardless of the type of service
- Ensuring that appropriate, effective age verification is in place to ensure that children and young people have age-appropriate experiences online
- Addressing the rise of sexually coerced extortion, or 'sextortion'

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