



# Child abuse, child pornography and the internet

Executive summary

John Carr – Internet Consultant, NCH



the children's charity

# Child abuse, child pornography and the internet

## Executive summary

Modern society has always found it difficult to detect and prevent child sex abuse, the majority of which has taken place within existing family or social circles or in certain institutional settings. The arrival of the internet has added to this difficulty by opening up new ways for paedophiles to reach and abuse children.

The internet has also opened up new means of distributing images of the sexual abuse of children. In pre-internet days police seizures generally yielded only a handful of pictures. Today it is not uncommon for a single suspect to be arrested with tens of thousands of images on his computer. In 2003 one man in Lincolnshire was found with 450,000 child abuse images and a private individual in New York was found with 1,000,000.

The global nature of the internet brings with it jurisdictional and logistical problems that add yet another layer of complexity. Detection, prevention, the identification and rescue of victims have become even harder. The speed at which the technology has grown, and can change, adds another twist.

Many paedophiles acknowledge that exposure to child abuse images fuels their sexual fantasies and plays an important part in leading them to commit hands-on sexual offences against children.

Because the internet is facilitating larger number of individuals becoming involved in collecting and possessing child abuse images, it follows that it is highly likely that more children are therefore now being abused than would otherwise have been the case. Moreover, whereas in the past child abuse images were mainly simply exchanged between collectors, organised crime is now involved, producing large numbers of pictures for sale.

Several studies appear to support the idea that there is a definite link between possessing and collecting child abuse images and being involved in abusing children. The largest study suggests

that one in three of those arrested solely for possessing child abuse images is likely to be involved, or to have been involved, in hands-on abuse. Others think that the proportion is much higher and that, in any event, everyone found in possession of child abuse images should be investigated and assessed on that basis.

In the UK the current legal framework in respect of child abuse images was established in 1988. In that year 35 people were proceeded against by the police. In 2001 the number was 549, an increase of 1,500 per cent. In total, between 1988 and the end of 2001, 3,022 people were either cautioned or charged with child pornography offences. The annual rate of increase was running well in excess of 33 per cent when, in 2002, under Operation Ore – arising from a single law enforcement action in the US – the UK police were handed the names of 6,500 people who had used credit cards to buy child abuse images from one website. Over 2,300 of these have now been arrested but they have not yet fed through to the published crime statistics.

The huge increase in arrests arising from Operation Ore is putting enormous pressures on the police, probation and court services and also calls into question whether or not all defendants are being assessed satisfactorily.

The internet is facilitating a major increase in children and young people being exposed to a wide range of age-inappropriate or illegal sexual and other kinds of material. No one knows what the long-term effects will be of this exposure but parents, teachers and others with a responsibility for children are greatly anxious.

It is clear that parents, teachers and others with responsibility for children must educate their children about the internet and how to avoid or deal with problems they may encounter on it. Parents and teachers can also be reasonably expected to take steps themselves to supervise

and protect children, but it seems equally clear that the internet industry in the widest sense must similarly accept a continuing duty to do all they reasonably can at a technological level to ensure children using their services will not come to any avoidable harm. Neither should the industry be indifferent to the possibility that the service they are providing might undermine parental preferences in respect of how they bring up their children. The fact that children at some time or other seek to evade rules laid down by their parents or teachers, is no reason for saying that parents and teachers should therefore abandon the effort and have no rules at all. Rules describe standards.

Within the UK, the government's Internet Task Force on Child Protection has played a decisive leadership role in formulating new laws and developing the child safety agenda. Most of the UK's leading internet companies have played an active part in the Task Force and have responded positively to its recommendations, but there remains a series of larger reforms that ought to be acted upon. The industry also needs to find new technologically-based solutions to assist the police and others in dealing with the new types of internet misuse that are emerging. Furthermore, with the advent of the new GPRS and 3G mobile phone networks, the internet is about to go mobile on a large scale, supported by new, sophisticated telephone handsets. Almost all of the issues of child safety on the internet that exist today become much more complex when the internet goes on the street.

Given the pre-eminent position of the US in almost anything and everything to do with the internet, we must look to the US government and law enforcement agencies to increase their effectiveness against the criminals who are using US-based resources to distribute child abuse images across all continents. We must also strengthen international efforts to deal with the rising tide of child abuse images starting to come out of other countries, often in poorer parts of the world.

Whichever way one looks at it the internet is an enormously important and valuable technological achievement. But that is not to say that civil society has simply to sit back and accept as inevitable whatever is served up to it by the industry.

Finding a solution to the problem of child safety on the internet is important in its own right, but as long as acceptable solutions evade us, much that is dynamic, valuable and indisputably legitimate about the internet is also threatened.

NCH is one of the UK's leading children's charities. We support the most vulnerable children, young people and their families so that they have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Copies of the full report, *Child abuse, child pornography and the internet*, can be ordered by calling NCH's Supporter Helpline on 0845 7 626579 (calls charged at local rate, open 9am–5pm monday to Friday).

The artwork featured on the cover is by a young person from No.28 Child and Family Counselling, an NCH project supporting children, young people and families affected by sexual abuse.

## **NCH**

85 Highbury Park  
London N5 1UD

**Telephone:** 020 7704 7000

**Fax:** 020 7226 2537

**[www.nch.org.uk](http://www.nch.org.uk)**

Registered charity no. 215301

As of 1 April 2004 registered charity no. 1097940/company no. 4764232

Produced by NCH 12/2003. 6629

ISBN 0 900984791