



The Online Enticement of Children: An In-Depth Analysis of CyberTipline Reports

INTRODUCTION

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children operates the CyberTipline, the nation's centralized reporting system for suspected child sexual exploitation. In 2017 alone, we received more than 10.2 million reports, a number that has been growing exponentially each year. The CyberTipline uniquely positions NCMEC to spot patterns and trends in child sexual exploitation, including the "online enticement" of children.

Online enticement covers a broad spectrum of victimization and occurs on all platforms. Someone enticing a child online can have a variety of motives and tactics. Often online enticement involves enticing a child to share sexually explicit images, meeting in person for sexual purposes, engaging the child in a sexual conversation or role-playing or, in some instances, to sell or trade the child's sexual images to others. This analysis only included enticement that occurred strictly online, and there was no indication that a meeting took place. It did not include any blackmail, known as "sextortion," which is another form of online enticement. Our in-depth analysis of sextortion is available at [MissingKids.org/sextortion](https://www.MissingKids.org/sextortion). A future analysis will look in-depth at those reports involving meeting in person.

To better understand this type of victimization, we analyzed 5,863 CyberTipline reports from January 1, 2015 through December 31, 2015. Patterns and trends were analyzed based on the information provided by Internet companies, other agencies and the public about the interactions/exchange of information by/between individuals regarding the online enticement of children. In all of these incidents, reports were made to the CyberTipline, jurisdictions were identified and the reports were forwarded to the appropriate law-enforcement agencies.

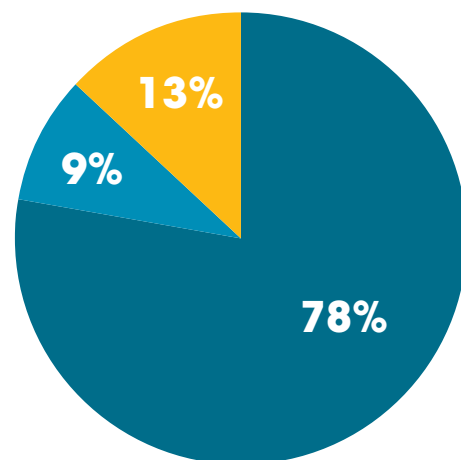
WHAT WE LEARNED

ABOUT THE REPORTED CHILD VICTIMS

The majority of reported child victims were girls (78%) while 14% were boys (for 9% of reports, gender could not be determined). The reported child victims ranged in age from 1 to 17, with a mean age of 15. Ultimately, whether children were below or above this average age helped determine their child age/gender category. Compared to younger boys (4%), older boys (8%) and younger girls (24%), older girls comprised the largest category of reported child victims (48%).

Although one primary victim was identified per online enticement report, almost 1 in 4 reports (23%) indicated that the offender had additional child victims. However, this estimate is likely an underrepresentation, given that there was often not enough information about additional children victimized by the same offender.

Overall Child Gender Breakdown



FEMALE • MALE • UNKNOWN

Of the reports in which it could be determined ($n=5,455$), 9% of reports indicated that the child victims had certain vulnerabilities prior to, or at the time of, the online enticement situation being reported. These vulnerabilities included mental health histories, developmental disorders, a history of talking to adults online and/or trading sexually explicit content online, a history of running away and/or some type of family abuse history.

ABOUT THE REPORTED OFFENDERS

Of the 5,917 offenders named in the reports; the majority were male (82%) while only 9% were female (for 9% of offenders, gender could not be determined). While an overall offender age-range and average age could not be calculated, some reported offenders were indicated to be as young as early teens and others as old as late adulthood, even into their late seventies.

Offender/child relationship.

Of the total reported offenders, 98% were individuals seemingly unknown to the children in real life while only 2% were likely known. Of these likely known offenders, more than half (53%) were indicated as family members and over half were identified as male (56%). Over one-third were identified as female (38%) and the gender was unknown for 6%. The most common reported familial offenders were identified as parents/step-parents (57%) or siblings (37%); more distant familial relationships were rare (e.g. aunts, uncles, cousins). Likely known non-familial offenders also ranged in closeness to the child, from those with greater physical access to the child (e.g. family friends, ex-intimate partners, etc.) to those with less physical access to the child (e.g., acquaintances in the community).

ABOUT THE REPORTING ENTITIES

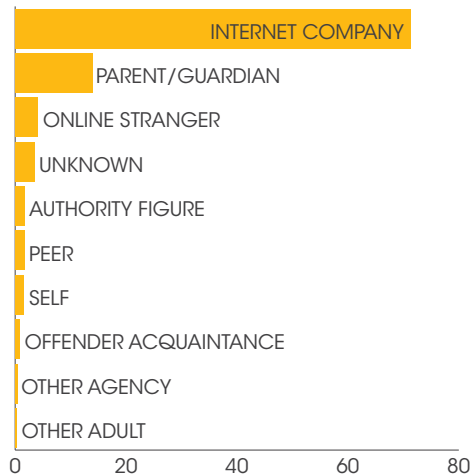
Internet companies were the most frequent reporter of online enticement to the CyberTipline (71%), followed distantly by parents/guardians (14%) and members of the general public unknown to the child victim (4%). The child victims only reported to the CyberTipline on their own behalf in ~2% of reports.

Child age and gender differences.

For both boys and girls, Internet companies and parents/guardians were the most common reporting entity type. Girls were disproportionately more likely to have had an Internet company make a report on their behalf (73%) compared to the proportion of boys (62%). In contrast, parent/guardian reports and self-reports were disproportionately more likely to have been made on behalf of, or by, boys (25% and 3%, respectively) compared to the proportions of girls (14% and 1%, respectively).

There were also significant differences in reporting entities by child age. While younger children were significantly more likely to have had a parent/guardian report on their behalf, older children were significantly more likely to have had an Internet company report for them.

Reporters to the CyberTipline



ABOUT THE REPORT TYPES

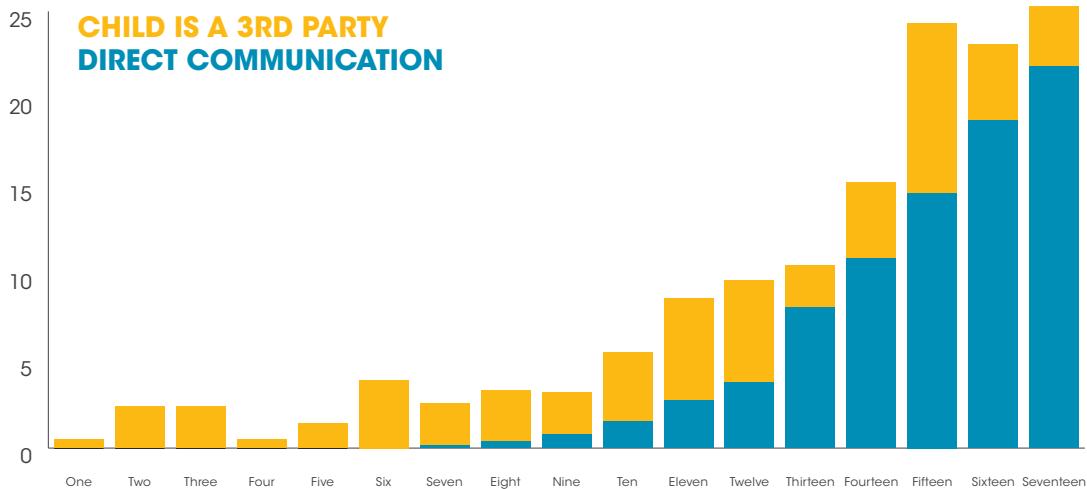
The CyberTipline online enticement reports can be characterized in two main ways—direct or indirect enticement of the children. The vast majority of reports (90%) involved **offenders’ direct communication with children**, or an attempt to do so by either individual. However, in a smaller proportion of reports (4%), **children were third-parties to the online enticement** by/between offenders (for 6%, report type could not be determined). For each of these report types, specific examples include:

Child/Offender “Direct Communication”	Child is a “Third-Party” to the Enticement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offenders (91%) or children (2%) initiating, or attempting to initiate, direct, one-to-one communication with the other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offenders engaging in direct communication with each other online related to the offering or solicitation of specific children (74%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offenders posting memes or advertisements online as general solicitations for any child of a certain age/age-range (6%) or; children posting memes/advertisements as a general offering to anyone who might be interested (1%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offenders posting memes/advertisements online to other offenders, either to offer a child/content of a child to any interested offenders (13%) or solicit those with access to any child/content of a child, typically within a certain age range (13%)

Child age and gender differences.

Children solicited directly by offenders were significantly older and less variable in age ($M=15$ years old; range=6-17years old) compared to children exploited as third-parties by/between offenders ($M=11$ years old; range=1-17years old). This is likely due to likely known offenders having greater access to children at younger ages. In contrast, likely unknown offenders disproportionately engaged in online enticement by initiating direct contact with children, a group only accessible once they are old enough to utilize the internet.

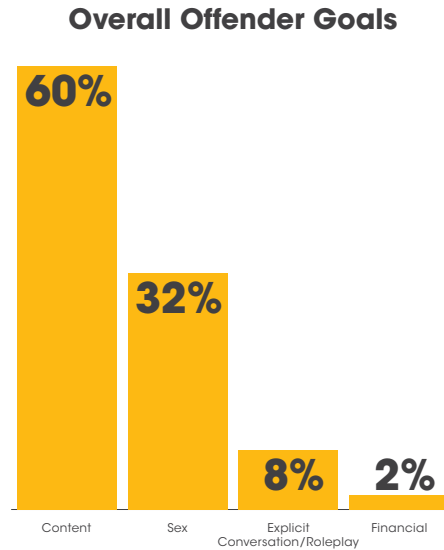
Child Age by Report Type



ABOUT OFFENDERS' GOALS

Of the reported offenders for whom it could be evaluated ($n=3,592$), a variety of apparent goals emerged (for 3% of offenders, more than one goal was indicated). Most commonly, offenders seemed to want sexually explicit images of children (60%); to meet and have sexual contact with children (32%); to engage in sexual conversation/role-play with children online (8%) and; to acquire some type of financial goal (2%).

In addition, there were other, less common and/or more difficult goals to determine, including trying to use children for sex trafficking purposes, whether in person or online; wanting revenge on children, by distributing their content to others; having some form of exhibitionist goals and; for children to offend upon other children.



Offender/child relationship.

Regardless of how children were exploited, directly or as a third-party, the offender/child relationship appeared to strongly indicate the offender's goals. Of the likely unknown offenders for whom goals could be determined, those in "direct communication" ($n=3,351$) and "third-party" ($n=131$) reports primarily seemed to want to acquire sexually explicit images of children (64%, 52%), to have sex with children (32%, 45%) and to engage in sexual conversation/role-play with children (8%, 4%). In addition, likely unknown offenders soliciting children directly, but not those exploiting them as third-parties, also seemed wanted to acquire some type of financial goal from children (<1%).

In contrast, offenders likely known by the children ($n=77$) seemed to have unique motivations, given the likelihood of previous access to child victims. Their apparent goals seemed to be sex, either a threesome or wanting to watch children with the other offender (40%); financial gain, such as by trading the child/child's content for money (29%), acquiring sexually explicit images, often by trading (21%); engaging in sexual conversation/role-play with the other offender and/or the child (6%) and getting revenge on the child, often by sharing explicit images of the child (4%).

Top Offender Goals by Offender Type		
"Direct communication" offenders ($n=3,351$)	"Third-party" unlikely known offenders ($n=131$)	"Third-party" likely known offenders ($n=77$)
Images (64%)	Images (52%)	Sex (40%)
Sex (32%)	Sex (45%)	Money/goods (29%)
Sexual conv/role-play (8%)	Sexual conv/role-play (4%)	Images (21%)

Child age and gender differences.

When offenders were in direct communication with children, boys were significantly more likely to be solicited by offenders wanting images or some type of financial goal, such as getting the children to sign up on some website requiring a credit card "for verification purposes". Furthermore, children were significantly older, on average, when sex was the apparent offender goal ($M=15.3$ years old) compared to when sex was not the goal ($M=14.8$ years old).

In contrast, when children were exploited as third-parties, likely known offenders were significantly more likely to be motivated by sex, sexual conversation/role-play or revenge goals when the victims were girls. In these revenge reports, offenders were solely indicated as girl’s ex-intimate partners, offering the children’s images to others online in retaliation after the relationship ended.

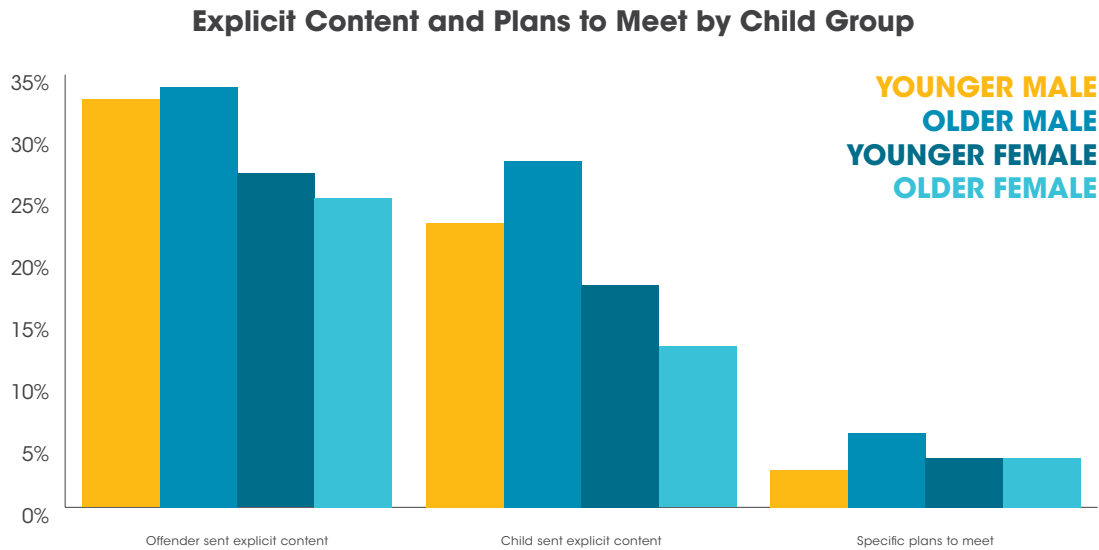
Offenders’ goals achieved.

Of the 5,863 total reports, 24% indicated that images of the reported child victims were sent to offenders—either by the child victims themselves or by another offender. Of these reports, 61% included images that were likely/known to be sexually explicit and 11% included images that were likely/known to be non-explicit (for 29% of the reports, it could not be determined). More commonly, offenders were the ones to send images of themselves to children (32%). Of these reports, 81% included images that were likely/known to be explicit while 6% included images that were likely/known non-explicit images (for 15% of the reports, it could not be determined). In a small percentage of the total reports (7%), offenders and child victims mutually exchanged sexually explicit content of themselves with each other.

Furthermore, in 12% of the reports, child victims and/or offenders mentioned meeting in person, either as a vague notion (8%) or, more seriously, involved the coordination of specific days, times and locations (4%). The percentage of children and offenders who actually met in person is unknown.

Predictors of offenders’ goals achieved.

When children were in direct communication with offenders, boys —especially older boys—were disproportionately more likely to have sent sexually explicit content of themselves, received sexually explicit images of offenders or engaged in reciprocal/mutual exchange of sexually explicit images and made specific plans to meet offenders in person.



In addition, children’s prior vulnerabilities also predicted offenders’ achieved goals. Children who were indicated as having a prior vulnerability (e.g. mental health issues, abuse, talking to adults online, trading sexually explicit content, etc.) were also more likely to have sent sexually explicit images of themselves to offenders and made specific plans to meet with offenders in person.

Lastly, the nature of the child/offender relationship also influenced the likelihood of offenders’ achieved goals. When children were third-parties to the online enticement, they were significantly more likely to be victimized when individuals likely known to them offered them/their images to others compared to when these likely known individuals were solicited by others for the child/child’s images. Of all the

reports in which the likely known offenders offered the children to others, the others were complicit 38% of the time; in contrast, of the reports in which likely known individuals were solicited for the children by others, the likely known individuals were only complicit 20% of the time.

ABOUT OFFENDERS' METHODS

Of the reports in which it could be determined ($n=5,455$), the following were the overall mostly commonly indicated offenders' methods against children:

- Engaging the child in **sexual conversation/role-play** as a grooming method, rather than a goal (34%)
- **Asking the child for sexually explicit images** of themselves (33%)
- **Developing a positive rapport** with the child, often through compliments, praise, discussing "shared" interests or acting caring/empathic, "liking"/commenting on children's online posts, etc. (29%)
- **Sending unprompted sexually explicit images** of themselves (23%)
- **Pretending to be younger** (20%), often by lying to the children but, sometimes, just when registering for their online account to circumvent the system and communicate with minors (22% of "younger" reports)
- **Offering sexually explicit images** of themselves to children (10%)
- **Asking children to reciprocally/mutually exchange images** (9%), often initiated by the offender, but sometimes as a compromise or "self-protection" measure by the child if the offender first "asked" for images
- **Offering something (other than images) in exchange** for fulfilling their goal (8%), such as some type of financial incentive (e.g. money, gift card, etc.); promises to buy them goods/gifts; substances (e.g. alcohol, drugs, cigarettes) and; other necessities, such as lodging, transportation or food
- In addition, offenders used a variety of **less commonly indicated methods** (<5% each), such as pretending to be: female, a modeling agent/photographer or someone known by the child by using a fake/stolen account; recording/capturing images of the child without their authorization; using an automated system/bot to communicate, likely to "cast a wide net" for victims and; asking the child to rate/evaluate a picture of them (often explicit)
- In some third-party reports, **offenders engaged in grooming or "testing-of-the-waters" approaches with one another**, such as engaging in sexual conversation or role-play that increasingly and systematically becomes more taboo and directed toward offering/asking about a child(ren) for sexual purposes

In addition, children sometimes engaged in their own behaviors that made them more vulnerable to exploitation, such as lying about being older when creating online accounts; initiating online communication with offenders and; offering offenders an exchange for sex or explicit images, such as financial compensation, alcohol or drugs, lodging, transportation, or goods/gifts.

Child age and gender differences.

Girls were significantly more likely to have had offenders try and develop a positive rapport with them; pretend to be younger, whether lying to them directly or when creating an online account; offer images of themselves; offer money, goods, substances, etc.; pretend to be a modeling agent/photographer and; ask them to rate/evaluate a picture of them. In contrast, male children were significantly more likely to have had offenders ask them for pictures; suggest reciprocally sharing images with each other and; pretend to be female.

ABOUT WHERE IT OCCURS ONLINE

Online enticement involved virtually every type of online platform. Of the reports in which it could be determined ($n=5,455$), over two dozen platforms were identified as actual or attempted online locations used by offenders. While most indicated one platform (78%), almost a quarter of reports indicated multiple platforms (21%; for 1% of reports, platforms could not be determined).

While some reports may have been limited to one online location because it was sufficient for the offenders' purposes, other reports seemed to indicate that additional platforms were not involved for various reasons, such as the offender being reported and/or the Internet company terminating communication; the child declining the enticement and/or ceasing communication or; the situation being reported at a stage in the enticement when additional platforms were not known to be involved.

Platform patterns.

Offenders' goals seemed to strongly determine the number of platforms involved. More specifically, one-platform reports were disproportionately comprised of offenders engaging in sexual conversation/role-play with children in private chats or messages; trying to acquire some type of financial goal or; specific types of sexually explicit content, namely, live broadcast shows. For each of these goals, communication was likely limited to one platform because the initial online encounter was already on a platform that served the offender's purpose.

When multiple platforms were involved, it was most common for conversations to begin on social networking or chat sites, where it was easy for offenders to meet children online, and for the subsequent platforms to be determined by offenders' goals. When offenders were trying to acquire sexually explicit images of children (the primary goal in multi-platform reports), they commonly tried to move the communication to platforms where they could more easily evade detection, such as anonymous messaging apps, text messaging or livestream sites/apps. Similarly, when sexually explicit conversation/role-playing was the goal and multiple platforms were indicated (more common on sole platforms), offenders moved conversations to similar types of sites (except livestream) for ease-of-communication and anonymity. In contrast, when sex was the apparent offender goal, communication was more likely to move to phone or livestream apps and, ultimately, result in the exchange of phone numbers.

Child age and gender differences.

Reports involving boys were significantly more likely to have indicated the exchange of phone numbers for texting/calling and, particularly for younger boys, to involve gaming platforms. In contrast, reports involving girls were significantly more likely to involve mainstream social media/networking platforms.

ABOUT THE AFTERMATH

Of the reports in which it could be determined ($n=5,455$), 2% indicated some type of negative effect experienced by the children as a result of the online enticement. The negative effects included feeling scared, experiencing anxiety and depression and attempts at self-harm or suicidal ideation. In a small percentage of reports (<1%), the child victim threatened some type of violence, such as suicide, due to the relationship being blocked (typically by parents).

Similarly, a small percentage of reports (<1%) indicated that offenders made some type of violent threat, either to hurt themselves or to hurt others, such as threatening to commit suicide or hurt the child and/or the child's family. Rather than these threats being used to coerce the child into fulfilling some type of request or demand (as with sextortion), these threats often came about after the online enticement, to prevent repercussions or out of frustration that the relationship was being blocked (often by the child's family).

CONCLUSION

Online enticement of children occurs in a variety of ways and involves boys and girls of all ages. Regardless of overall patterns, distinct victimization experiences emerged, with certain child victims at greater risk on certain platforms, with varying offender methods used against them and experiencing a range of negative effects—some as a result of the victimization and some, seemingly, in defense of the perceived "relationship". Furthermore, offenders also exhibited a variety of apparent goals, from maintaining solely online communication to attempting to meet children face-to-face. Ultimately, online enticement appears to be a very different experience based on child and offender factors and should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all type of victimization.