

## Online sexual exploitation as Globalization Homemade Problems

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### Abstract

Online sexual exploitation is a global epidemic that is increasing at an alarming rate. At any one time, 750,000 individuals across the world are looking to connect with children and young people online for sexual exploitation. Advances in information and communications technologies and increasingly sophisticated digital tools that provide anonymity mean the number of potential victims is growing exponentially, and so too is the pool of those seeking to abuse them. In 2019, record-breaking 70 million total images and videos were reported to NICMEC, an enormous increase on the 1.1 million it received in 2014. One in three Internet users are under 18 years, and more children own or have access to Internet-enabled smart devices. Social media has created new opportunities for would-be offenders to interact with children anonymously and unsupervised. Sexualized images of girls and young women are ubiquitous in advertising, merchandising, and the entertainment industry. New data gathered by United Kingdom-based internet watchdog the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) revealed that 30 percent of sexually explicit images of children found online are self-generated. The IWF took action over 124,605 images found online between January and November 2019. Over three-quarters of these images (78 percent) featured children aged 11 to 13, mostly girls.

**Keywords:** sexual exploitation, globalization, homemade problem, online, Internet

### 1. Introduction

An investigation by *The New York Times* on how technology companies and the United States government are being overwhelmed by this epidemic found that a record 45 million online photos and videos of child sexual exploitation were reported by US-based technology companies to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 2018.

Adolescent girls are particularly at risk of being groomed, coerced, or blackmailed into providing explicit images and videos, often via webcams, which can then be posted online and shared via networks across the world.

Children sometimes send videos and images to peers on smartphones and via social media platforms. Victims can be left feeling sexually violated, powerless, socially isolated, and stigmatized. Mental health problems include depression, and suicidal thoughts.

As victims reach the age of majority, they no longer have the legal protections afforded to minors in different legal and policy contexts.

The sense of revictimization arises from images of abuse being shared repeatedly across the digital landscape and viewed multiple times by countless people. Frequently, requests asking for content to be removed are ignored, or image taken off one online platform, soon reappear elsewhere. This can feel like ongoing sexual assault. Governments, technology companies, research institutions and many others are providing examples of successful interventions and innovations.

In 2009, Microsoft partnered with Dartmouth College to develop Photo DNA, a technology that aids in locating and removing online child abuse content. Today, PhotoDNA is used to detect and report millions of illegal images. It works by creating a unique digital signature of an image called a “hash”. Similar to a fingerprint.

Organizations such as Net Clean and Thorn are creating tools to assist law enforcement, tech platforms, and civil society organizations in identifying illegal material online, track exploiters, and bring them to