

Good [afternoon]. I am Alexandra Gelber, the Deputy Chief for Policy and Legislation at the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the U.S. Department of Justice. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss successful strategies for addressing the use of technology to facilitate trafficking in persons. Because my office specializes in the prosecution of crimes involving child sexual exploitation, I will focus my remarks on child sex trafficking.

There is no question about the link between online technology and child sex trafficking. Social media, websites, and messaging apps can be used to identify, to recruit and control victims, to advertise the victims, and to arrange commercial sex with customers. Prosecutions brought by the U.S. Department of Justice bear this out. According to reports prepared by the Human Trafficking Institute, a U.S. non-governmental organization, data concerning conduct that took place before and during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that approximately 40% of sex trafficking victims are recruited online, making the internet the most common place where victim recruitment takes place.

Relatedly, online advertising has dwarfed other tactics used by traffickers to solicit buyers of commercial sex for over a decade. For example, in 2020, over 80% of the Department's sex trafficking prosecutions involved online advertising. This is not an aberration, and it is not due to the pandemic. Online advertising has been the top method of solicitation since 2006, and was the primary strategy

employed by traffickers in 81% of all federal sex trafficking prosecutions filed from 2000 through 2020. Of note, however, the advertisements are almost never explicitly for sex trafficking. The ads virtually never explicitly indicate a minor is being advertised, nor do they typically directly state that commercial sex is being offered. Since the pandemic, the United States has seen an increase in the sale of sexually illicit imagery that may be associated with sex trafficking.

I also would like to emphasize that technology is also used to commit what the Department calls “virtual child sex trafficking.” This takes place when an offender in the United States sends digital payment to a trafficker in another country. The trafficker will then sexually abuse a child in front of a web camera, while the offender in the U.S. watches a livestream of the abuse. Children may be moved from rural areas to urban areas in the country where the abuse takes place. For example, in January of this year, Christopher John Streeter was sentenced to life in prison after pleading guilty in 2020 to a criminal charge involving the sex trafficking of a minor under the age of 14. He was also ordered to pay \$70,000 in restitution to two victims. According to the plea agreement, from as early as September 2018 through June 2019, Streeter sent payments to the Philippines in exchange for depictions of the victims, who were as young as 12, engaging in sex acts. Streeter paid a premium for videos and images depicting female minors losing their virginity or who were inseminated and placed at risk of pregnancy.

As this case shows, this type of criminal activity was taking place long before the COVID pandemic. These offenders are particularly worrisome because they are often what the Department calls “preferential offenders” in that they specifically seek to watch children being sexually abused. Although the Department believes that the pandemic has increased the prevalence of this type of crime, we do not have any statistical information at this time.

To address this, it is not enough to prohibit the dissemination of advertisements that promote the sexual exploitation of children. Because the advertisements often are not so explicit, either with respect to the involvement of children or with respect to the offer of commercial sex, laws must be broad enough to permit the initiation of investigations where advertisements facilitate sex trafficking, regardless of whether they explicitly do so. Similarly, countries must be able easily to share and obtain evidence from one another concerning technology-facilitated sex trafficking, even when the advertisements on their face may not indicate trafficking is involved. If any one country provides a safe haven for websites that host advertisements that facilitate sex trafficking, it undermines the efforts of all others to combat this crime.

Similarly, this Working Group should consider recommending that Member States enact laws, if necessary, to permit the investigation and prosecution of virtual child sex trafficking, and to afford protections to victims of such conduct.

Since in these cases the offenders are in one country and the victims are in another, Member States could be encouraged to develop an adequate infrastructure to facilitate the payment of compensation to the victims. Particularly as the COVID pandemic accelerates the adoption of livestreaming platforms, and may replace to a certain extent in-person exploitation, any comprehensive response must seek to eradicate this type of crime.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.