CONCEPT NOTE

URGENT NEED TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL (CSAM) ON THE INTERNET

The sexual abuse of children is a serious form of violence against children, and it is reviled in every country in the world. The creation, publication and repeated distribution of images and videos of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is also a crime in virtually every jurisdiction. CSAM is both a consequence of and fuel for further abuse.

Child victims of abuse have repeatedly made clear that the availability over the internet of CSAM which depicts them is an egregious form of re-victimization, adding to an already severe injury. Its continued availability establishes an ever-present fear someone who knows or recognises them has seen or will see it thus creating additional concerns for the child's safety. To the extent such images also encourage or sustain individuals with a sexual interest in children, the continued availability of CSAM constitutes an ongoing threat to children everywhere.

In 2021, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 29.3 million reports, referencing 85 million individual items of CSAM. In 2022, the number of reports received increased to 32.5 million. In addition, as of March 1, 2023, Project Arachnid, a global platform created and operated by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, has issued over 26 million notices to electronic service providers worldwide requesting the removal of CSAM and harmful-abusive images of children hosted on their platforms.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the volumes of CSAM being produced and distributed over the internet grew significantly but perhaps the key point is this was against the background of a long-term upwards trend which shows no sign of abating.

In addition to the life altering and tragic consequences of sexual abuse for the survivors/children, these harms also have other serious adverse effects. There are pronounced economic impacts both in respect of the children themselves and for the societies in which they live. These wider macro, short and longer-term economic implications have too often been overlooked.

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1 See: Child Sexual Abuse Material: Model Legislation & Global Review - International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (icmec.org)
2 Child sexual abuse material (CSAM), which is generally defined as “imagery or videos which show a person who is a child and engaged in or is depicted as being engaged in explicit sexual activity” (INHOPE (2022) “What is CSAM”). In many countries, images and videos of children being sexually posed or that are focused on sexual organs are also illegal. Among other things, CSAM can be used as a tool for the grooming and control of the victim. CSAM is also used as a tool for grooming other children by normalizing the inappropriate interaction and to have the child imitate what is depicted. Offenders take meticulous efforts to maintain and expand their collection.
3 In fact, according to Interpol, 2021 was the worst year on record for child abuse images, see https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2022/INTERPOL-Secretary-General-Online-child-sexual-abuse-at-record-levels.
4 See: CyberTipline Data (missingkids.org)
5 Several studies seek to quantify the economic impact of child sexual exploitation and abuse, see, for example: The Economic Costs of Child Sexual Abuse in Canada | Request PDF (researchgate.net); The economic burden of child sexual abuse in the United States - PubMed (nih.gov); The cost of child sexual abuse | Bravehearts.
survivors very often have issues gaining and maintaining employment, in many instances due to psychological or physical problems associated with the abuse they suffered.\(^8\) Investing in preventing the re-upload of known CSAM and taking action to eliminate the distribution of CSAM therefore protect the safety and privacy of children/survivors and have positive social and economic outcomes for society at large.

The international community, national governments and the private sector need to engage in concerted and immediate action to avoid the multiples harms caused to individuals and to society by the proliferation of CSAM. Every upload and re-upload of CSAM represents a failure of our shared responsibility to protect children from crime and violence.

**PROMOTING PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS AND ENGAGING NEW ACTORS**

Though online child sexual abuse and exploitation is criminalized in most countries, criminal justice and protection measures require specialized skills and approaches that some States are yet to acquire or develop to the requisite degree. In addition to enhancing the traditional criminal justice response of pursuing the perpetrators of these heinous crimes and calling them to account, we must also, alongside it, develop an appreciation of how to secure the best interests of the child, one of which ways is to secure the swiftest possible removal of CSAM from further public view or distribution.

The private sector has a critical role to play in this shared endeavour as they own and exercise day to day control over the platforms and systems which propagate CSAM. Many private sector actors have been energetically engaged in the fight against CSAM over many years, yet the volumes of CSAM finding its way on to the internet continue to rise. What additional measures or actions can private sector agencies undertake to ensure a higher and more consistent level of activity to move towards zero CSAM on the internet? What mechanisms are most effective to enhance collaboration among stakeholders to eradicate online CSAM?

**THE VIENNA EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON CSAM REMOVAL**

UNODC, in partnership with the Government of the United Kingdom,\(^9\) will convene an expert group meeting in Vienna on 26-27 June 2023. The objectives of the meeting are to discuss some of the gaps and limitations in current approaches to the problem and to formulate new ways to accomplish the twin goals of removal of CSAM images online, linked to a comprehensive strategy to prevent the re-upload of known CSAM.

The meeting will bring together experts in their individual capacities. Participants will include child protection and criminal justice experts, academics, representatives of civil society organizations, the private sector and financial institutions.

The Vienna expert group meeting on CSAM removal will produce a chair’s summary and overview and follow up on any recommendations that might be announced.

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\(^8\) https://protectchildren.ca/pdfs/C3P_SurvivorsSurveyFullReport2017.pdf

\(^9\) In January 2023, the GA adopted the resolution A/RES/77/233 on “strengthening national and international efforts, including with the private sector, to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse”. This resolution requests UNODC to “assist Member States, upon request, in creating age- and gender-sensitive strategies and responses for preventing and combating child sexual exploitation and abuse, to improve understanding of child sexual exploitation and abuse internationally and fostering the cross-sector responses required, including from the Internet service providers and access providers” as well as to “support Member States in preventing and combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse”. Following the adoption of this resolution, UNODC was requested by the Government of the United Kingdom to carry out an initiative aimed to better protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse.