Background Information and Context

Children are increasingly using the internet to communicate and form relationships and this can be considered a natural part of their development. Online behaviour has dramatically changed in recent years, with new communication channels, improving internet coverage and access to mobile devices. *Net Children Go Mobile* research shows 1 in 5 children (22%) have had contact online with people they have never met face to face.[1] There is a collective responsibility to educate children on how to protect themselves online.

'One of the new and emerging manifestations in online behaviour is a phenomenon referred to... as online sexual coercion and extortion'[2]. It has also been described as 'webcam blackmail'. This cyber-enabled crime involves blackmailing individuals whose sexual photo and/or video was made available in an online environment. There are two major motivations for the online sexual coercion and extortion of children; sexual and financial.

Offenders approach children online to obtain sexual photos and/or videos. To achieve this they try to gain trust, establish a relationship and lure minors into sexualised conversation and performing sexual acts online. When offenders have possession of sexual photos and/or videos, they may demand more images or ask for money, threatening to share the images online if the child doesn't do as they say. Offenders may not necessarily be adults, cases can also involve peers.

The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)[3] analysed CyberTipline[4] reports[5] and found that 78% of offenders wanted to acquire increasingly more explicit sexual content of the child and 7% wanted to obtain money or goods.[6] The sexual gratification of a perpetrator appears to be the primary motivating factor. Offenders commonly escalate their demands, both in the quantity of images/videos and/or the level of seriousness.[7] Financially motivated offences are predominantly carried out by organised offenders based outside of the European Union (EU) and are a comparatively new trend. A high profile case of this kind was the suicide of a 17 year old boy from Scotland, who was targeted by a group operating from the Philippines. He was tricked into taking part in an explicit Skype chat believing he was talking to a girl of the same age in the United States. The offender demanded money
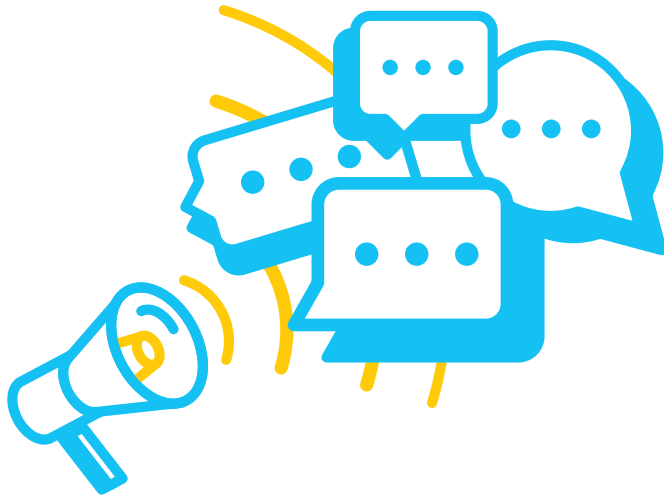
and threatened to post his naked images on social networking sites if he failed to pay.[8]

The NCMEC also collected information detailing the manipulation tactics used, often in combination, by offenders:

— Reciprocation – 'I'll show you if you show me'

— Developing a bond by establishing a friendship/romantic relationship online

— Using multiple online identities against a given child, as the person coercing or extorting for sexual content as well as pretending to be a supportive friend or sympathetic victim of the same offender

— Pretending to be younger

— Pretending to be female when they are really male

— Accessing the child's online social media account without authorisation and stealing sexual content involving the child

— Recording the child unbeknownst to them while on a video chat

— Initially offering something to the child, such as money or drugs, in exchange for sexually explicit material

— Pretending to work for a modelling agency

— Using pre-recorded footage, often created by specialised software or obtained from pornography and live-sex camera sites[9]

The NCMEC found that 67% of offenders threatened to post sexual content online, with 29% specifically threatening to post it in a place for the victim's family and friends to see. Other tactics used by the perpetrators include:

— Physically threatening to hurt or sexually assault the child or his/her family members

— Threatening to take their own lives

— Threatening to create sexual content involving the child by using digital editing tools

— Creating a fake profile as the child and threatening to post sexual content involving the child

— Saving sexually explicit conversations with the child and threatening to post them online[10]

Many children do not seek help or report their concerns to the Gardaí because they are embarrassed about the material the perpetrator has or because they are unaware they are the victims of a crime. In the context of preventative intervention, an awareness programme addressing the characteristics of online sexual coercion and extortion of children will make children and young people aware of acceptable and unacceptable online communication, including the illegality of some online practices.

Prevalence and Research

Online sexual coercion and extortion of children, as one of the new crime phenomena of the digital age, is greatly in need of further research. Assessing the scope of online sexual coercion and extortion affecting children is challenging as it may be heavily underreported and there are no data sets which could be used for comparison. There are currently no statistics available detailing the prevalence of these offences in Ireland but reports recently published in Europe can help to shape a picture of the online sexual coercion and extortion of children.

The Brookings' report[11] aimed to define the remote coercion of sexual material or activity and focused on 78 cases involving 1397 victims. The author's state this figure is the tip of the iceberg, the number of actual victims believed to range between 3000 and 6500. Of the 78 cases, 71% involved only minors and 18% involved a mix of minors and adults.[12]

The NCMEC data also highlights key findings in this area. 1428 reports of online sexual coercion and extortion of children were received by CyberTipline from October 2013 to April 2016. According to NCMEC, since the CyberTipline began tracking this phenomenon in October 2013 these reports have been on the rise. In the first full two years, between 2014 and 2015, there was a 90% increase in the total number of reports. This pattern has continued, with reports up 150% within the first several months of 2016 compared to the number of reports in the same time frame in 2014.[13]

The UK National Crime Agency's Anti-Kidnap and Extortion Unit (AKEU) received 1247 reports of offences assessed as cyber-enabled blackmail in 2016, more than triple the figure for the previous year (386)[14] The offender's motivation was specified in 738 of the 1247 cases, and the majority of cases (665) were financially motivated.[15]

Offenders whose main motivation is to obtain sexual material and/or sexual favours offline are typically male, operate alone but share or exchange the acquired content, may act on both an international or national level, target female victims, and may know the victim in person.[16] Offenders whose main motivation is to obtain money are both male and female, are members of an organised criminal enterprise, operate in teams based in developing countries, may act on both an international or national level, target male victims based in countries linked by language and do not know the victim in person.[17]

Characteristics of children involved in cases of online sexual coercion and extortion include:

— Naivety of the children, either on a relational level or on a technical level

— Absence of parental control/engagement with online behaviour

— A willingness to share self-generated sexual content

— A significant amount of time spent online each day

— The use of social networks and other ways of online communication, especially through mobile devices

— Befriending strangers

— Sexualised conversations with strangers

— A lack of technical knowledge about the dangers of the internet[18]

There can be serious, negative consequences for the wellbeing of children involved in cases of online sexual coercion and extortion. NCMEC's study found children commonly experienced a range of negative outcomes, including hopelessness, fear, anxiety and depression.[19] Note these characteristics are applicable in particular to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities as they are significantly more likely to be vulnerable or victimised than those who don't have any.

According to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) experts from the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT-Cyber-CSE) community, notifications about cases of online sexual coercion and extortion of children were received via multiple sources. Around 70% were reported directly by the victims, family members or teachers.[20]