



What we've learned operating Cybertip.ca for two decades

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When the tipline first launched in September 2002, little was known about the scale or nature of the online victimization of children. We could never have imagined the degree, methods and speed by which children would be accessed and injured through the use of technology. Nor did we forecast the wraparound harms that resulted from an unregulated internet, where those looking to harm children faced no accountability or consequence.

For 20 years, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) has operated Cybertip.ca — a national tipline to report online crimes against children, as well as an educational platform to increase the personal safety of children. There will never be a statistic that can capture the knowledge we have gained working on the frontlines of trying to reduce online harms to children and the details we have learned about the devastation inflicted on children and their families. Rather than focusing on facts and data, we will be documenting insights on how the historical inaction to regulate the internet has led to a series of significant injuries to children around the world.

This is our story; these are our ground-level observations from responding to, witnessing, and uncovering the extent of online crimes against children and the broader erosion of childhood in general. Children have paid a terrible price.

This is an immediate call to action for governments, who have the power to put a robust safety net in place in the online world for children and protect those most vulnerable.

We are seeing an unprecedented level of sexual abuse and violence against children

The vast technological advances, developed with no consideration for the safety of kids, over the last two decades have resulted in adults having access to children in unprecedented ways. This, along with the anonymity of users and an unregulated internet, has placed children in a very compromised and vulnerable position.

We are regularly observing children as young as six or seven, whose faces are completely visible, being coerced over livestream into a sexual act while using unsupervised, unmoderated platforms. Unbeknown to these little children, offenders are then recording them to share on the dark web and other spaces.

Young teens are being manipulated or groomed into sharing sexual imagery or engaging in sexual acts. In some cases this swiftly leads to sextortion, and in other cases it leads to escalating control tactics and extreme violence against these adolescent victims. The victimization can continue for years with one or more perpetrators — often without the guardians of the child knowing. Over the last two decades, too many children have died by suicide, feeling it is the only way to escape the ongoing terrorization by online offenders. The silencing power of shame and humiliation, combined with anonymity, has armed offenders with enormous control over the lives of too many children and young people.



The explosion of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is incomprehensible. We have witnessed the consequences of the poorly architected response to CSAM. It has caused irreparable damage and ongoing victimization to the children and adult survivors of this horrific crime. Technology platforms whose business model profits off of user-generated content are culpable for the ongoing proliferation of this crime, which to date has been largely left to fester due to the unregulated internet. Moreover, the rigid adherence to narrow criminal law definitions of what constitutes CSAM, which do not cover the spectrum of harmful and abusive images that spread online, severely limit what is required to be removed and fails the children shown in the images.

Technology has been weaponized against children

From cellphones, laptops, and tablets, to chat apps, search tools, online gaming, and social media — all these “technological advances” were developed with little, if any, consideration for children’s safety. Their use exposes children to graphic sexual content, provides access to unknown adults, and creates a space where children can be coerced into explicit acts that are then shared for all to see. If these were offline products, they would be pulled from the shelves in an instant. The absence of government interventions, lack of child developmental considerations, and no oversight of various technologies, products, and services has led to the abdication of responsibility to the harms inflicted upon children.

Unlike other offline spaces where governments have rules, regulations and expectations of companies and spaces that serve children, online guardrails and interventions simply do not exist.

The burden and blame has wrongly been placed entirely on parents.

Parents are at a loss of how to manage, respond, and keep their children protected

The early pleas for phones or access to social media has put parents in unforgiving situation. Couple that with the speed at which new platforms, games, and technology in general evolve and it all places an unreasonable onus on parents to keep up. Through our work over the past 20 years, we have intersected with caregivers from all kinds of backgrounds. Regardless of how extensive they supervise and oversee their children’s activities, it is impossible for parents to fully safeguard their children online. Given that devices now go with kids wherever they are, it is absurd to expect parents to oversee all of their children’s time online. Moreover, many adults committing violence against children online are predatory and motivated; they move between spaces and places online where children are regularly engaged.



This perfect storm means that parents are often blindsided when they learn that their children have been victimized. We have connected with thousands of families in crisis who need guidance and support about how to manage, respond or intervene to help their child. Technology companies must be held to account for poorly designed platforms, lack of age verification, and allowing anonymous adults to gain access to children in predominantly unmoderated environments.

The faulty construction of the internet has mobilized abusers and normalized harmful behaviours towards children

Through our work operating Cybertip.ca, especially over the last seven years, we have observed growing networks of adults with a problematic sexual interest in children. These online communities share illegal material, talk about their CSAM collections, encourage each other, and share tactics — including “how to” manuals. They normalize the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and affirm these cognitive distortions. Of critical concern, many in these communities obsess over certain victims, try to locate them and even stalk them well into adulthood.

We are deeply concerned about the organized culture of these online offender communities and the toxic, distorted way that they communicate and share with one another. Environments like the dark web fester and facilitate this conduct with absolutely no consequence. This is unacceptable.

So what now?

Immediate government action, regulation and civil litigation. These actions are critical. Technology companies have wielded far too much power — for profit, at the expense of children. We cannot continue to lose children because their online experiences are not safe. Parents cannot continue to be blamed, when children do not even have to leave their bedrooms to be exploited and targeted online.

As I look back on the last 20 years, I am struck by what a privilege it has been for our agency to serve Canadians, and by the powerful impact Cybertip.ca has had in helping children. I can only hope that we are telling a different story 20 years from now.

