

Online sexual exploitation of children and youth

SEXUAL VIOLENCE SECTION

STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

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KEY FINDINGS

- Online sexual exploitation of children and youth refers to acts of sexual nature directed at people under the age of 18, committed or distributed via technology.
- Many of these acts are criminal offences under the Canadian Criminal Code, such as luring and child pornography.
- The number of cases of online sexual exploitation of children and youth is on the rise in Canada and Quebec.
- It can occur in several virtual locations, including on social media.
- Online sexual exploitation can have a variety of consequences for young victims.
- Preventing this violence requires strategies that impact society, environments, living environments, and individuals.

BACKGROUND

This document provides an overview of the issue of online sexual exploitation of children and youth. It has been prepared by two researchers specialized in forensic psychology and criminology, in collaboration with the INSPQ. It complements the other texts in the Sexual Violence Section, available on the INSPQ website.

The [Sexual Violence Section](#) presents information on sexual violence compiled by the INSPQ at the request of the Secrétariat à la condition féminine. It is based on data from scientific and grey literature.

This information is primarily intended for public health authorities at the ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux and regional public health departments, health and social services network professionals, and community workers. Researchers, students, journalists, and the public can also benefit from this knowledge.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Online sexual exploitation of children and youth refers to acts of sexual nature directed at people under the age of 18, committed or distributed via information and communications technologies.
- In the Canadian Criminal Code, child pornography (which will be replaced by “child sexual abuse and exploitation material” in October 2025) and luring a child are offences considered to be online sexual exploitation.
- In Canada and Quebec, the number of police-reported cases of online sexual exploitation of children and youth is constantly rising.
- There are many virtual locations where online child sexual exploitation can take place, such as peer-to-peer networks, the dark web, communication applications, and social media.
- Online sexual exploitation of children and youth has consequences for victims, including on their mental health (e.g., hypervigilance, depression), physical and sexual health (e.g., sleep disorders, avoidance of sex), and social life (e.g., relationship and family problems).
- The majority of perpetrators of online sexual exploitation of children and youth are men and boys. Certain psychological, socio-demographic, and criminal factors and characteristics distinguish them from perpetrators of offline sexual abuse.
- Preventing online sexual exploitation of children and youth requires strategies that act on a societal level, on environments, on living environments, and on an individual level. It also requires collaboration between different stakeholders, such as public safety, public health, and digital companies.

Paedophilia

Paedophilia refers to a sexual disorder characterized by sexual attraction to, or sexual fantasies about, prepubescent children (usually under the age of 13), without necessarily acting on them. Paedophilia is confirmed by a diagnosis made by a qualified professional in an individual aged 16 or over, based on a set of predefined clinical criteria.

The term “paedophilia” is sometimes misused in the media to refer to sexual behaviour committed by an adult towards a person under the age of 18. In fact, not all paedophiles sexually abuse children. Conversely, people who abuse children do not necessarily meet the clinical criteria for paedophilia; there may be other reasons for the assault.

WHAT IS ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

The information presented in this section is provided for informational purposes only. It does not constitute legal advice and is not legally binding.

Online sexual exploitation of children and youth refers to acts of sexual nature directed at people under the age of 18, committed or distributed via information and communications technologies, such as electronic devices (e.g., smartphones, computers), whether or not they are connected to the Internet.

In Canada, it is associated with two main categories of offences in the Criminal Code: child pornography and luring a child(1).

It should be noted that the terminology “child pornography” is criticized, as it can minimize the seriousness of the crime by implying that children and young people are complicit in the abuse(2). A bill, due to come into force in October 2025, will amend the Criminal Code to replace the term “child pornography” with “child sexual abuse and exploitation material”(3). In this text, the term “sexual exploitation material” will be used to refer to child pornography, except when data on offences reported by the police are presented.

Those who commit these offences (sexual exploitation material and luring a child) will be referred to in this text as “perpetrators of online sexual exploitation of children and youth.”

Child and youth sexual exploitation material

In Canada, the legal term child pornography refers to any pornographic representation, visual or audio (written, recorded, video, photo, etc.) of sexual nature of a minor (under 18 years of age). It is a [sexual offence](#) under the [Canadian Criminal Code](#) (s. 163.1). Several child pornography-related behaviours are specifically prohibited by this law, such as producing, printing, publishing, distributing, transmitting, making available, selling, importing, exporting, possessing or accessing child pornography. Advertising child pornography is also prohibited.

In addition to depictions of actual sexual abuse of minors, Canadian legislation also covers digitally generated content. This includes, for example, images created by computer with editing software, images generated using artificial intelligence, and animations depicting underage characters in sexual situations(4,5). This approach aims to prevent all forms of exploitation by speeding up investigations and prosecutions (e.g., by removing the need to determine whether an image is real or digitally created), and by promoting effective and rapid action against the dissemination of such content online.

Luring a child

Luring consists in communicating with a minor (under the age of 18), using the Internet or communication technologies, with the aim of committing an online (e.g., sexual exploitation material) or offline sexual offence (e.g., sexual interference, invitation to sexual touching, exhibitionism, sexual assault). Some people will contact a minor online to meet in person, while others will commit the offence exclusively online. Luring a child is an offence under the Canadian Criminal Code (s. 172.1).

Luring often involves deception or manipulation by an adult to commit an offence against a minor. For example, the adult may ask or try to convince the minor to send intimate photos or videos of themselves, either by pretending to be someone else, by trying to develop a romantic relationship with the minor, or by threatening them to release other personal images or information. The photos or videos obtained then have the potential to be used for blackmail or extortion purposes to obtain more images or money(6).

Sextortion

Sextortion consists of extorting sexual favours or money from a person contacted via the Internet or by text message, under the threat of disseminating a sexually explicit photo or video(7,8). Sextortion is not an offence as such in the Criminal Code, but depending on the circumstances, it can be linked to the offences of extortion, harassment, distribution of intimate images without consent, luring, or sexual exploitation material(9).

From 2023 to 2024, 2,600 cases of sextortion were reported to the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. In general, girls are more often asked to share additional sexual images of themselves, while boys are more often asked for money, under the threat of disseminating a sexually explicit photo or video(8).

HOW WIDESPREAD IS ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

Internet access and use have grown rapidly in recent years. By 2020, it was estimated that 92% of the Quebec population had Internet access at home(10). Children and young people are increasingly using the Internet and electronic devices, such as smartphones and computers, to communicate with peers and family, for entertainment and learning. According to the 2022-2023 Québec Health Survey of High School Students, a quarter (25%) of high school students spend 4 hours or more a day in front of a screen for communication and leisure activities. The risks associated with this exposure for young people's health and well-being are numerous(11), and include a greater risk of becoming a victim of online sexual exploitation.

As with other forms of sexual violence, the extent of online sexual exploitation of children and young people is underestimated. Certain factors specific to this form of violence compound this underestimation(12,13), such as:

- The variety of methods and tactics used by perpetrators of sexual exploitation, which makes systematic detection and accurate measurement of the prevalence of these offences difficult.
- The difficulties and reluctance of victims to identify and report their victimization.
- The similarity between communications that fall within the scope of a sexual offence (e.g. online interactions between young people and malicious adults), and those that do not (e.g. healthy, consensual online interactions between young people).

In Canada, according to available data, police-reported and public-reported online child and youth sexual exploitation incidents are steadily increasing. From 2014 to 2022, Canadian police data show that the rate of online child and youth sexual exploitation incidents has more than tripled, from 50 to 160 incidents per 100,000 children and young people per year. An incident refers to a single distinct event during which police may report up to four offences, regardless of the number of victims. These cases include both sexual offences against children and young people online (including luring) and child pornography offences. The rise in this rate could be explained either by a real increase in this type of crime, by an increase in their reporting by victims or those in their environment, or in their detection by the police, or by a combination of these elements.

However, since not all incidents of online sexual exploitation are reported to the police, data from external sources, such as [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca), are useful to better understand the extent and evolution of online child sexual exploitation(9). In 2023, [Cybertip.ca](https://www.cybertip.ca), Canada's national tipline for reporting online sexual exploitation and abuse of children and young people, processed nearly 27,500 reports of online sexual exploitation from the public. This represents a 45% increase over 2022(14).

Child and youth sexual exploitation material (child pornography):

- In Canada, police reported 45,816 incidents of online child pornography from 2014 to 2022, with the rate nearly quadrupling during that time, from 32 to 125 incidents per 100,000 children and young people per year(9).
- Men and boys accounted for 90% of child pornography offenders, with half of them under the age of 29(9).
- In Quebec, from 2019 to 2024, the number of child pornography-related reports received and processed by the Sûreté du Québec nearly quadrupled(15).

Luring a child:

- In Canada, from 2014 to 2022, police reported 15,630 incidents of sexual offenses against children and young people online (rising from 18 to 34 incidents per 100,000 children and young people per year), which includes 11,971 incidents of online luring(9).
- Men and boys accounted for 96% of perpetrators, half of them under the age of 25(9).
- The majority of luring victims were aged between 12 and 17 (82%). When gender is taken into account, the majority of victims were girls (84%)(9).

WHERE DOES ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH OCCUR?

Online sexual exploitation occurs in several virtual locations. These venues can also be used to distribute or access sexually exploitative material, or to communicate with children or young people for the purpose of committing an offence (luring). These offences can be committed through(16–19) :

- Newsgroups or chat rooms (hosted on websites and often password-protected) and peer-to-peer file-sharing networks¹.
- Pages or sites hosted on the dark web, part of the hidden Internet (deep web), which can be accessed using special browsers and software, and whose documents are not indexed by traditional search engines, unlike the surface web.
- Communication applications, including e-mail, text messaging, and anonymous messaging platforms or those linked to online games.
- Social media and photo/video sharing platforms.

¹ Peer-to-peer file-sharing networks are networks in which computers can exchange data or share the same resources, without the need for a central server or other interconnection equipment.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH?

Online sexual exploitation can have many lifelong consequences on the mental, physical and sexual health and social lives of the children and young people who experience it. These consequences can arise both from sexual abuse suffered offline and from the dissemination of images of such abuse online, in the case of the sharing of sexually exploitative material. Furthermore, as these images can remain permanently accessible online, they can exacerbate the consequences of the violence experienced(20).

In terms of mental health, victims of online sexual exploitation may report anxiety, hypervigilance, dissociation (feeling detached from oneself), depression, paranoia, and lower self-esteem. Some also report self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. Cases of completed suicide have also been recorded. Physical and sexual health problems (e.g., sleep disorders, avoidance of sex), as well as relationship and family problems, are also reported. Many victims also report consequences for their professional lives, such as an inability to find or keep a job or to work, and for their education, such as interrupted studies due to absenteeism, illness or depression.(20,21).

In 2016, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection conducted an international survey of 150 survivors whose images of past sexual abuse have or may have been disseminated online. The results show that the recording and potential dissemination of this abuse has had the effect of exacerbating the survivors' trauma. The presence of a permanent record of their abuse reinforced their fears and the feeling of being constantly revictimized. Many people also report feeling ashamed, humiliated, and powerless in the face of the circulation of images of their abuse. They express a constant fear of being recognized by people who have seen these images. Among the survivors who say they have been recognized, some report having been assaulted or stalked, having received unsolicited advances, or having been blackmailed by these people(20).

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND OFFLINE PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE?

Perpetrators of online sexual exploitation of children and youth do not all have the same profile, although they are overwhelmingly male(9,20). However, certain psychological, socio-demographic and criminal factors and characteristics are more frequently identified in these individuals than in other groups, such as perpetrators of offline sexual abuse. These distinctions are important, as they can guide the development of strategies to prevent online sexual violence.

Compared to men in the general population, male perpetrators of online sexual exploitation are more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse as children. However, they are less likely to report such abuse than perpetrators of offline sexual abuse(22,23). Also, consumers of child and youth sexual exploitation material tend to have a more problematic, intrusive or atypical sexuality than perpetrators of offline luring or child sexual abuse(22,24–26). For example, they have a stronger sexual interest in

children, receive more diagnoses of paraphilias², use sexuality more often as a strategy for regulating negative emotions and stress, and express more sexual concerns(22,25,27,28).

Compared with perpetrators of offline sexual abuse, consumers of sexual exploitation material are younger, better educated and better integrated socially and professionally(22,24,29). They generally grew up in less dysfunctional family environments, are less impulsive, and have fewer behavioural problems(22,23). Moreover, they display a more prosocial personality, are less inclined to use psychoactive substances and have fewer beliefs in favour of child sexual abuse(22).

Studies show that perpetrators of online child and youth sexual exploitation are generally less involved in crime than perpetrators of offline child and youth sexual abuse. For example, they have less criminal history of sexual offences and lower recidivism rates(22,23,30). According to a meta-analysis of nine studies of men convicted of using child sexual exploitation material, around 5% committed a new sexual offence (2% a sexual contact offence and 3% an offence involving child sexual exploitation material) during the follow-up periods of the studies, ranging from one and a half to six years (28).

HOW CAN ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH BE PREVENTED?

Preventing online sexual exploitation of children and youth requires a variety of actions on several levels. Preventive strategies can act at the societal level (e.g., legal), on the environments in which individuals evolve (e.g., digital), on living environments (e.g., school, family), and at the individual level. These strategies can target different levels of prevention, preventing violence from occurring in the first place, reducing the risk of certain populations experiencing it (e.g., young people) or committing it (e.g., adults with a sexual interest in children or young people), or working with perpetrators of sexual exploitation to reduce the risk of re-offending.

Preventing online sexual exploitation of minors therefore requires the involvement and collaboration of many stakeholders, including public safety, public health, digital companies, educational institutions, and communities.

² A paraphilia is a form of sexual expression characterized by the preferential and repetitive, even exclusive, choice of atypical objects, rituals or situations as a means of arousal and obtaining sexual satisfaction.

Public policy and legislation

The implementation of public policies aimed at preventing online sexual exploitation of children and youth is a strategy for acting at the societal level. For example, public policies can create a framework in which a variety of preventive strategies are coordinated and deployed at the regional, provincial, or national level.

In Canada, the *National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Online Sexual Exploitation* calls for action on several levels to better protect children and young people online. These actions focus mainly on:

- 1- Prevention and awareness (e.g., educating children and young people, parents, and teaching staff about the risks of online sexual exploitation of children and youth).
- 2- Identification, apprehension, and prosecution (e.g., building the capacity to investigate and track down offenders).
- 3- Protection (e.g., detecting and expediting the removal of publicly available images, providing support services to victims).
- 4- Partnerships, research, and strategic support (e.g., collaborating with national and international stakeholders)(31).

Implementing new laws and strengthening existing ones are other important measures. To counter online sexual violence against children and youth more generally, the World Health Organization (WHO) notes the criminalization of certain behaviours, such as online grooming, and the strengthening of some existing penalties. It also points to strategies such as increasing the visibility of police activity, which could deter potential perpetrators from committing a crime, and informing the public by reminding them of what is considered illegal, such as downloading sexual images of children. Another promising legal strategy is to require digital companies to report online crimes and remove illegal content(32). In Canada, under the *Act respecting the mandatory reporting of Internet child pornography by persons who provide an Internet service* (2011), persons or entities who provide an Internet service to the public are required to report known or suspected cases of child and youth sexual exploitation material(33).

Safety of the digital environment

To reduce the risks of online sexual exploitation, the digital environment must be safe, especially for children and young people. Strategies targeting this environment face many challenges, due to the constant evolution of technologies, the rapid spread of online content, and the absence of geographical boundaries for its distribution. Methods for detecting illegal online content, for example, must constantly adapt to this evolving environment(32).

To create a safer digital environment, companies in the digital sector can implement certain measures. They can limit the ability to search for and find child and youth sexual exploitation material, display warning messages to those searching for illegal content, and make it easier for users to report such content. They can also introduce measures to detect, report and remove sexually exploitative material(32). The use of warning messages and chatbots is one of the strategies whose effects are

being increasingly documented. Studies show that these messages, which appear during searches for child and youth sexual exploitation material, can dissuade potential perpetrators from accessing this material, and may even lead them to seek help from resources such as those for people concerned about their sexual attraction to children(32,34,35).

The Canadian Centre for Child Protection also makes several evidence-based recommendations aimed at reducing the availability of sexually exploitive images of children and youth through regulatory measures aimed at electronic service providers. Financial penalties could be introduced for providers who fail to comply with regulatory requirements relating to the reporting of such material. User-generated content platforms could be required to equip themselves with automated tools for proactive image detection(36). Some countries have already introduced such measures, such as Italy, where electronic service providers are required to use appropriate filtering tools, failing which they face substantial financial penalties(37).

In Canada, Project Arachnid is a specialized tool developed by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection that automatically detects images of sexual exploitation of children and youth on both the surface and dark web. It then issues deletion requests to the electronic service providers who host them. It operates internationally, collaborating with numerous reporting centres and child protection organizations across 15 countries. In fact, from 2018 to 2020, Project Arachnid detected more than 5.4 million photos and videos of child sexual abuse and harmful or violent images on the servers of more than 760 electronic service providers worldwide(36).

Public awareness

Continuously raising public awareness is a strategy used to inform the public about the issue. For example, awareness-raising messages about online child safety can be aimed directly at parents, young people, potential perpetrators of online sexual exploitation, or even the community as a whole(32,38). Raising awareness and encouraging the public to report cases of online sexual exploitation of children and youth to Cybertip.ca also has the potential to increase the number of cases reported to the police(9).

Although awareness campaigns can be useful, they are often insufficient on their own to prevent violence. They must therefore be part of a set of complementary strategies. Given the scope of these campaigns, their effectiveness is difficult to assess(32).

Educating children and youth and those around them

Education programs aimed at preventing online sexual exploitation most often target children and youth and their parents, so that they develop knowledge and skills to reduce the risk of being victimized. Often implemented in schools, some programs address one or more technology-related or non-technology-related topics, such as digital citizenship, online safety, Internet-related risks, skills to reduce exposure to these risks, sexuality education, and help-seeking. Although they often have an effect on modifying certain factors associated with online violence, their effectiveness in reducing online sexual exploitation has yet to be explored(32).

Intervention and support for victims and perpetrators of sexual exploitation

Providing support for underage victims of online sexual exploitation and those around them, and working with perpetrators or those at risk of becoming perpetrators, are essential services that complement other prevention strategies. They can, for example, help victims recover, or even prevent sexual exploitation before it occurs for the first time, in the case of potential perpetrators(32).

Several hotlines aimed at preventing the sexual exploitation of minors are available in Quebec and Canada. In Quebec, [Ça suffit](#) is a free, anonymous support service (phone and chat) launched in 2021 aimed at reducing the emotional suffering of people who have sexual fantasies about children.

The site also offers self-help modules that can be completed individually. From January to October 2024, Ça suffit recorded 245 new requests, mainly from people directly affected by this issue, but also from their family and friends, victims and professionals.

In Canada, [Talking for Change](#) is an organization that provides anonymous support (via phone or chat) and free therapy services. It is offered to people who are troubled by their sexual attraction to children or child sexual abuse material, or who fear committing sexual abuse against a child. The aim of the service is to help these people live safe, healthy and non-offending lives.

Several individual interventions, such as cognitive-behavioural, sexological, and pharmaceutical therapies, are also aimed at managing and rehabilitating perpetrators of online sexual exploitation of children and youth, or those at risk of committing it(39).

- To find out more about sexual violence prevention, visit: <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/sexual-violence/prevention>.

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Online sexual exploitation of children and youth

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LAYOUT

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