



IJM

LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN:

The Need for Online Safety Legislation



COVID-19 lockdowns created the optimal conditions for an increase in many forms of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC), including trafficking of children to produce child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) content via livestreaming. Quarantined online child sex offenders spent more time online while vulnerable children were confined at home, often with their traffickers. Although more research is needed, [indicators](#) show a spike in the online sexual exploitation of children during lockdowns.

Despite COVID-19 and associated restrictive measures, IJM Philippines were able to continue achieving operational success, supporting front line government agencies 52 operations over the last year, helping 154 children to safety and arresting 48 suspects. In 2020, IJM Philippines marked its [100th conviction](#) obtained in OSEC cases supporting Philippine public prosecutors.

Yet, challenges remain. IJM works on cases of children – half of whom are 12 years old or younger – trafficked to create new CSEA content, including via livestreaming, for paying sex offenders, often from places like the UK. Livestreaming allows online offenders to pay for and direct the sexual abuse of children in real time. The UK is the [third largest consumer](#) in the world of livestreaming abuse.

Highlighted as an “emerging threat” by [INTERPOL](#), livestreaming is an incredibly difficult crime to detect and there is an urgent need for improved detection, reporting and crime disruption. In fact [Europol](#) reports that, ‘The number of reported incidents involving live distance child abuse has steadily increased in recent years. This development has further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.’

IJM therefore applauds UK Government’s proposals to introduce a statutory duty of care for companies through online harms legislation. This legislation will build on and reinforce the UK’s domestic and international efforts in tackling OSEC.

The UK’s investment in initiatives like the Philippines Internet Crimes Against Children Center has enabled collaboration between law enforcement agencies around the world to work towards combatting this crime. PICACC brought together the Philippine National Police Women and Children’s Protection Center (PNP WCPC), the National Bureau of Investigation Anti-Human-Trafficking Division (NBI AHTRAD), the Australian Federal Police (AFP), and the United Kingdom National Crime Agency (UK NCA), as well as IJM, to create a collective response to countering OSEC. PICACC recently marked its third anniversary. Since 2019 PICACC has conducted 179 operations, in which 526 children have been brought to safety and 113 suspects arrested, demonstrating that international collaboration is key to breaking the cycle of abuse.

Our recommendations fall into three categories: **robust online harms legislation, proactive detection of first-generation child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) content and transparency and reporting.**

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

ONLINE SAFETY BILL

The Online Safety Bill presents a critical opportunity to significantly improve protection for vulnerable children around the world. The Bill will require online platforms to carry out risk assessments and take steps to address and mitigate any risks or vulnerabilities in order to protect users, in particular children.

The Bill is strong in relation to preventing the dissemination of CSEA content and children encountering illegal content. However, these platforms aren't just where abusive material is published. Sex offenders use these services and platforms as tools to commit child sexual abuse through livestreaming.

IJM recommends extending the duties of care created by the Bill to limit the opportunity which sex offenders have to abuse children. To ensure effective enforcement, IJM recommends equipping OFCOM to take action against online platforms which do not adequately address CSEA content on their platforms or which allow UK-based users to pose a threat to children.

INTERNATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT AND NGO COLLABORATION

IJM is a founding member of the Philippines Internet Crimes Against Children Centre (PICACC), an international collaboration to address online sexual exploitation of children, including Philippine, UK and Australian law enforcement.

Since 2019 IJM has worked with partners in the PICACC to conduct 179 operations, in which 526 children have been brought to safety and 113 suspects arrested. Amidst the pandemic, they conducted 52 operations, helping 154 children to safety, and arresting 48 suspects.

This form of collaboration between international law enforcement partners and NGOs is essential to tackling online sexual exploitation and other forms of international crime.

DATA: MEASURING IMPACT

IJM's Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children has developed a Scale of Harm project to estimate the prevalence of trafficking of children to produce child sexual exploitation materials. This has been done in close collaboration with the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab and experts from organisations across the technology, financial, government, and non-government/child protection sectors, as well as the Local Survivor Network in the Philippines.

Across IJM's projects our teams are rigorous in their approach to data collection to ensure we have an evidence base against which to measure progress and to ensure our efforts are directed where they are most needed. As a result, we have been able to demonstrate our impact: we have seen exploitation reduced by up to 86% in areas in which we have worked.

LISTENING TO SURVIVORS

IJM is proud to have supported the convening of local survivor groups, leading to the creation of the Global Survivor Network (GSN). The GSN includes survivors of modern slavery, violence against women and girls and police abuse. The GSN's Leadership Council's members are survivor advocates who consult with local survivor groups and lead the GSN in creating a survivor-led movement.

Policies and interventions aimed at tackling violence must be shaped by those who have lived experience. It is only by hearing directly from survivors that we can truly understand how vulnerabilities to violence and opportunities for offenders are created, how cultures of impunity become established. Understanding these dynamics and how policy and resource decisions can exacerbate or mitigate individual vulnerability, is vital to developing an effective, sustainable response.

