

ANNUAL REPORT 2020



Break the Cycle

one report at a time

CONTENT WARNING: Please be aware that the content enclosed relates to child sexual abuse and exploitation. As such, some readers may find parts of this Annual Report uncomfortable or upsetting to read.

The publication aims to raise awareness and inform policy development in the area of child protection and online safety by providing facts, figures and a glimpse into the work undertaken at national and international level to combat child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation online.

Bringing this very difficult topic into the light can help everyone in society to better understand, talk about, and address both challenges and opportunities for enhanced multi-stakeholder collaboration in this non-competitive space. Whether you've been following this issue for years, or you are just beginning to learn more, this is an active conversation that requires consistent and ongoing attention and collaboration, together with long term strategic commitment from the European Commission and national Governments.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of our members, supporters, partners or the European Union.

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THANK YOU

Combatting child sexual abuse and exploitation online is central to the work we do here at Hotline.ie, in fact it is why we were established in 1999. Since then we have been working at the intersection of civil society, law enforcement and online service providers for the protection of countless children within Ireland and abroad.

Our mission of eradicating child sexual abuse from the Internet is clear and we strive to continually hone our assessment expertise, remain agile and adaptable to meet current and emerging challenges.

2020 was a year unlike any other, even for an organisation accustomed to adversity, however it has also reminded us of the importance of acknowledging and recognising our accomplishments.

We would like to thank our members, our national and global partners, and all the essential workers and front line responders contributing to the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse who have continued their extraordinary work throughout the public health emergency measures.

No matter what the next year brings we are determined to continue to build resilience and work collaboratively by developing better strategies and stronger partnerships to combat the availability and proliferation of child sexual abuse online, break the cycle of child sexual exploitation, prevent repeat-victimisation of children and ensure Ireland remains one of the most hostile hosting environments in the world for this nefarious purpose.

Our sincere heartfelt gratitude to everyone for the role they have played and will continue to play in actively supporting us and our mission.

You can also make a tangible difference by either reporting to us if you suspect to have come across sexual images or videos of under 18s online, funding us, or collaborating on technology, research and best practice development. Break the Cycle.

Thank you,

Hotline.ie team

CONTENTS

4

Foreword:
Minister of State

6

Welcome from
our President

8

No Excuses

9

Call it for what it is

10

About us

12

What to report

13

The journey of
a report

14

Statistics & findings

15

Statistics & findings:
at a glance

16

Statistics & findings:
volume of reports
received in 2020

18

Analyst Testimonial:
Break the Cycle

19

Statistics & findings:
reports classified as
child sexual abuse
material

20

Statistics & findings:
the children in
the imagery

21

Statistics & findings:
CSAM distribution

23

Statistics & findings:
snapshot of CSAM
hosting patterns

24

Statistics & findings:
snapshot of CSAM
hosting patterns

26

A Partnership
Approach

27

Working in partnership
with 46 other hotlines
worldwide, as part of
the INHOPE network

29

Working in partnership
with law enforcement

30

Our Members

31

Working in partnership
with our Members,
online service providers
operating in Ireland

32

The Irish Safer
Internet Centre

34

Glossary of terms

36

Break the cycle.
One report at a time

Foreword: Minister of State

As Minister of State, I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute the foreword to this Hotline.ie Annual Report for 2020, Break the Cycle: One report at a time.

Throughout 2020 and despite the difficult circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 global pandemic, Hotline.ie continued to provide a vital avenue for members of the public to securely, anonymously and confidentially report suspected illegal content online, particularly child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

Overseen by the Department of Justice, and collaborating with An Garda Síochána, Hotline.ie has carried out this commendable and difficult work for 22 years with diligence and professionalism. Prioritising online safety is a key element in building stronger and safer communities under the current Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, and this is reflected in the Department of Justice's commitment to tackle crime and support online safety outlined in Justice Plan 2021.

Recent years have seen considerable increases in the number of reports being received by Hotline.ie, and 2020 is the third consecutive year that Hotline.ie has received over 10,000 reports from the public. Following assessment from expert Hotline.ie Analysts, this annual report shows 2020 saw a 10.75% increase on the previous year in reports classified as child sexual abuse material. While this reflects increasing public engagement with the service, it also potentially demonstrates a concerning, sustained increase in illegal online child sexual abuse material. One note of particular concern is the 142% year-on-year increase in material that appears to have been self-generated also represents a growing concern for child safety online.



As this Annual Report details, child sexual abuse material is not a victimless crime. Each report can involve anything from a single image to thousands of images and videos, with victims ranging in age from infants younger than 3 years old to pubescent children, while the severity of the abuse in the material extends to the very worst level of categorisation. Every such image and video is a crime, and for each of these there is a victim, or victims, who have suffered abuse, and who are re-victimised each time their abuse is viewed as it is disseminated across the globe.

Combatting this illegal, harmful and predatory use of the internet requires a collaborative, adaptive approach involving as many stakeholders as possible. To this end, the publication of Hotline.ie's new Code of Practice in 2020 marked another positive step, and the Department continues its efforts to engage with relevant organisations to encourage the taking up of corporate membership.

I very much look forward to positive and continued cooperation with Hotline.ie as it carries out its important work.

Hildegard Naughton

TD, Minister of State



Overseen by the Department of Justice, and collaborating with An Garda Síochána, Hotline.ie has carried out this commendable and difficult work for 22 years with diligence and professionalism. Prioritising online safety is a key element in building stronger and safer communities under the current Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, and this is reflected in the Department of Justice's commitment to tackle crime and support online safety outlined in Justice Plan 2021.

Hildegarde Naughton, TD, Minister of State



Welcome from our President

Welcome to the Hotline.ie 2020 Annual Report. Reflecting on last year, it goes without saying that, 2020 presented its share of challenges. However, in the face of a global pandemic Hotline.ie's mission and the impact of our efforts has never been clearer.



Hotline.ie's mission is to eradicate child sexual abuse material (CSAM) from the Internet. We never lose sight that each image/video shows a real child victim in need of support or a survivor being re-victimised with each repeat viewing and sharing of their abuse online. Identifying this harrowing content for swift removal at source, breaks the cycle of exploitation and abuse experienced by too many child victims and survivors.

Hotline.ie is an integral part of a national multifaceted ecosystem which in itself is part of a global child protection ecosystem. CSAM is a global problem which cannot be tackled on our own or in isolation.

I would like to note that the existence of Hotline.ie and this vital work is only possible because of you – our members, our partners and everyone working on the front lines advocating for the child's rights and protection from all forms of harm and abuse. I would also like to acknowledge the Department

of Justice oversight and ongoing support, together with the invaluable partnership and collaboration with An Garda Síochána.

From the early days of the current pandemic, Hotline.ie was identified as an essential service which allowed for the provision of an uninterrupted service. It was nothing less than inspiring to witness, even in the hardest moments of 2020, the unwavering commitment and relentlessness of the team at Hotline.ie, placing the interests of the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation above any self-interest or preservation. While the current pandemic has given rise to a unique set of circumstances which may have impacted the production, distribution and scale of online CSAM, the true effects of the pandemic may not become apparent or be fully understood for years to come.

.....

This past year has also brought with it a plethora of new strategies and legislative initiatives aimed at prioritising, strengthening and enhancing the fight against CSAM whilst protecting and fostering the child's rights. Notably, the European Union 2020-2025 Strategy for a more effective fight against (offline and online) child sexual abuse, by improving prevention, investigation, and assistance to victims, together with an ambitious programme of legislative reform with the potential to effect long-lasting positive change. Additionally, the Irish Government published the General Scheme of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill at the end of 2020. This seeks to make the Internet a safer place for all by addressing the growing concern of online harms, of which child sexual abuse has been specifically highlighted.

In 2020 we have also adopted a revised Code of Practice which sets out the framework for collaboration between Hotline.ie, online service providers (our members) and An Garda Síochána to ensure streamlined processes, swift removal of CSAM from the Internet, whilst ensuring the children in the imagery may be identified and safeguarded.

Hotline.ie is committed to continuing this essential work in conjunction with our members, the wider national ecosystem tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse, and international partners. We remain hopeful that the wider online service providers industry operating in Ireland recognises the merit in contributing to this vital service and supporting us in our mission.

Finally, this report provides a glimpse into what we've accomplished in 2020 and the contribution we made towards the protection of countless children within Ireland and abroad. Although the subject matter might make for uncomfortable reading, we hope it sheds light on this difficult topic and that you obtain a valuable insight into the work of Hotline.ie.

Thank you.

Alan Shanley

**President of the Hotline.ie
Board of Management**

NO EXCUSES

It's a crime to

engage in any sexual acts with a child under the age of 17 years.

It's a crime to

send sexually explicit material (any indecent or obscene images, videos or words) to a child under the age of 17.

It's a crime to

knowingly produce, distribute, disseminate, print, publish, import, export, advertise, sell, show, supply, or make available any child pornography.

CALL IT FOR WHAT IT IS



The imagery I assess every day is a record of the horrific abuse suffered by a child. In most cases, these children are younger than 12 and subjected to a level of physical and psychological abuse that is sometimes beyond comprehension. I urge you to consider this message while you read our report or when raising awareness of these crimes against the most vulnerable in society. Avoid and reject the use of terms that would trivialise the abuse suffered by child sexual abuse victims and survivors. Call it for what it is – child sexual abuse – and in doing so challenge the normalization of such crimes against children.

Eoin, Hotline.ie Analyst

We use the term “child sexual abuse material” (CSAM) or “child sexual abuse imagery” (CSAI) to accurately convey the gravity and nature of the images and videos we assess on a daily basis, and challenge any notion that such crimes against children may be carried out pursuant to the consent of a child (under the age of 18).

The use of this term is also outlined in the Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines which provide all individuals and agencies working for the prevention and elimination of all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children with guidance for a better understanding and use of the different terms and concepts they may encounter in their work.

The requirement for the Terminology Guidelines stemmed from “a growing concern that changes to existing terms (especially established legal terms) might cause confusion or lack of understanding,

and even hinder the effective prevention and elimination of child sexual exploitation” (Luxembourg Terminology Guidelines)

Hereinafter we will use the term “child pornography” when specifically referring to the legal definition, otherwise we will be using the terms CSAM or CSAI.

Under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 [as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017], Irish law defines the sexual abuse, sexual coercion, and sexual exploitation of children using the legal term “child pornography”. As provisioned by the Act, “child pornography” includes any visual or audio representation, be it an image, audio recording, a video, a drawing, pseudo-photograph (i.e. where the computer-generated image is almost indistinguishable from that of a real living child), or written material i.e. story about the sexual assault of a child.

ABOUT US



Who we are

Founded in 1999, Hotline.ie is the Irish national centre of expertise combatting online child sexual abuse material and activities relating to the sexual exploitation of children, i.e. child grooming.

For over two decades we've provided a web-reporting service where members of the public can securely, anonymously and confidentially report suspected illegal content online.

We assess every report that we receive, and when it shows the sexual abuse of a child we make sure the imagery is swiftly removed at source.

We work at the intersection of civil society, law enforcement, online service providers and NGOs, for the protection of countless children within Ireland and abroad.



Vision & Mission

Our vision is an Internet rid of CSAM and a digital world with zero tolerance of sexually exploitative acts or conduct towards children.

We work to:

- Reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse material online by removing it at source;
- Break the cycle of child sexual exploitation and prevent re-victimization;
- Maintain a zero-tolerance approach to online child sexual exploitation and ensure Ireland remains a hostile hosting environment.



Working Together to Fight a Global Problem

Hotline.ie works closely with a diverse mix of Government and inter-governmental agencies, law enforcement, online service providers and NGOs. We are a founding member of INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines) and work in collaboration with 46 other hotlines worldwide to ensure the swift removal of CSAM from the Internet, irrespective of where in the world the content is hosted.

Our operational procedures are approved and overseen by the Department of Justice; we work in close collaboration with An Garda Síochána and our members. Hotline.ie is also an integral part of the Irish Safer Internet Centre alongside Webwise, ISPCC-Childline and NPC.



Funding

We're a not-for-profit organisation and our work is co-financed by the European Union through Grant Aid under the Connecting Europe Facility: Safer Internet Programme and by our members (online service providers). Our resources are finite and we encourage others to play their part whether by reporting suspected illegal content online to Hotline.ie, funding us, or collaborating on the development of best practices, technology and research.

What to report

Hotline.ie only handle reports referring to suspected illegal content encountered online. Urgent situations where persons may be in immediate danger should always be reported directly to An Garda Síochána.



You can securely, anonymously and confidentially report to **Hotline.ie** incidents of:

- Child sexual abuse material (i.e. image, video, text, non-photographic child sexual abuse content such as drawings, computer generated etc.)
- Activities related to the sexual exploitation of children i.e. child grooming
- Racism or xenophobia
- Financial scams purporting to be Irish financial services or have Irish contact details or that appear to have originated from Ireland

Without question, seeing images and videos of child sexual abuse is understandably upsetting. If you suspect to have come across sexual images or videos of under 18s online, it is vital to report such content, just because you click away it doesn't mean it's gone.

Our highly skilled Analysts assess every report that we receive against rigorous standards and by reference to Irish legislation. Their assessments are accurate and trusted by law enforcement, online service providers and INHOPE counterparts.

We will take action to have content removed from the Internet only when the reported content is classified by our Analysts as meeting the criteria set out in the Irish law i.e. Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 [as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017].

The process through which child sexual abuse images and videos are removed from the Internet is called "Notice and Takedown". All reports classified by the Hotline.ie highly-skilled Analysts as child sexual abuse material, and where the content was hosted in Ireland, were taken-down within 24 hours.

The journey of a report

Go to www.hotline.ie, click on 'make a report' to anonymously and securely submit a report.

Each report is analysed and classified in accordance with Irish law by our highly trained certified Analysts.

When a report is classified as 'not illegal', no further action is taken.

When a report is classified as potentially illegal, the Internet location of the content is traced by our Analysts.

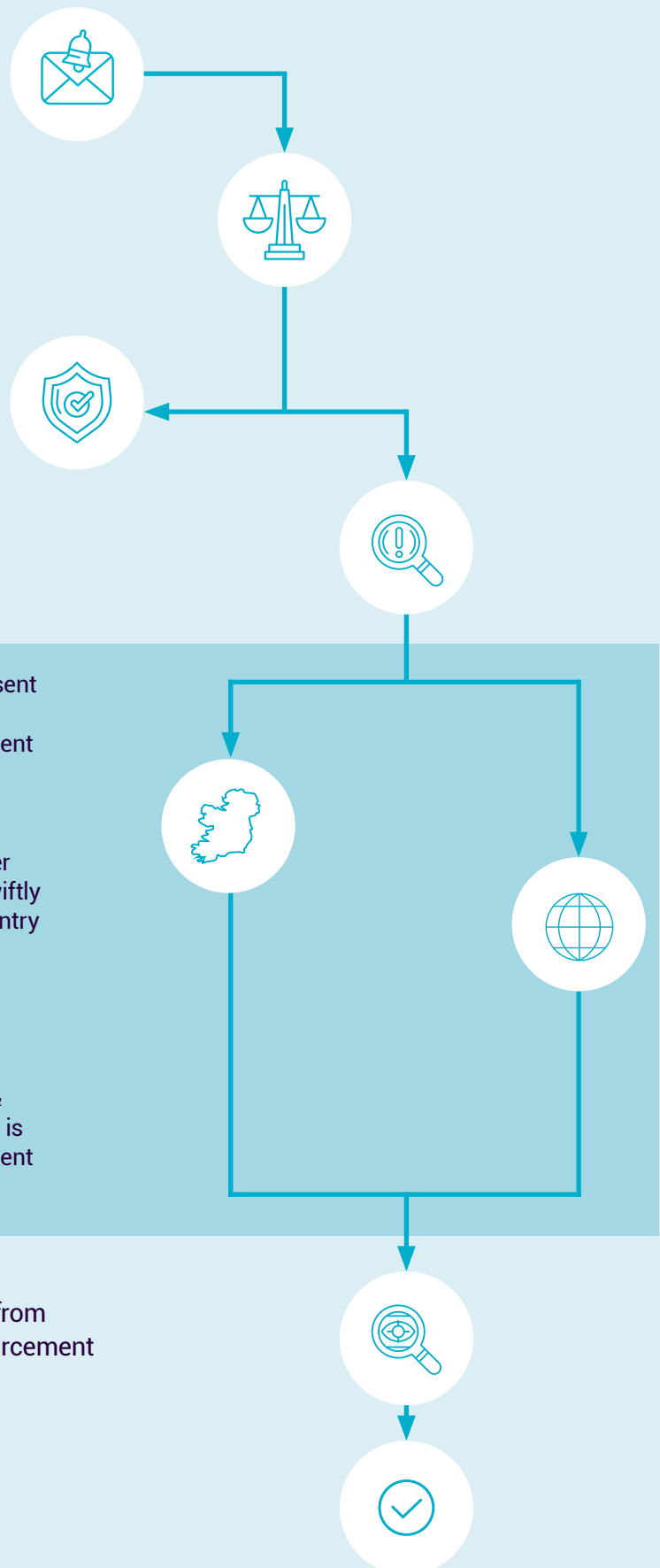
CSAM traced to Ireland: simultaneous notice is sent to (1) AGS* & (2) the appropriate OSP** which is responsible for the removal of the specified content from the Internet.

CSAM traced to a country other than Ireland: simultaneous notice is sent to (1) AGS & (2) sister hotline(s) in the source country(ies) to have it swiftly removed. If there is no hotline in the hosting country the report is dealt with through international law enforcement channels.

Other illegal content traced to a country other than Ireland (i.e. racism, xenophobia or financial scams): simultaneous notice is sent to (1) AGS & (2) the appropriate online service provider which is responsible for the removal of the specified content from the Internet.

Our Analysts monitor the removal of CSAM from the Internet and liaise with the OSP, law enforcement and hotline counterparts as required.

CONTENT REMOVED



STATISTICS & FINDINGS

Context:

Ensuring the protection and safety of children online is a matter of public interest, civic duty, and social responsibility. Hotline.ie is proud to provide this essential service that is a part of a wider national ecosystem combatting child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Our work relies on a compassionate and resilient team, of highly skilled expert Analysts, who spends every working day manually assessing some of the most challenging content imaginable. We are the conduit between law enforcement and OSPs with the view of ensuring that CSAM is not only swiftly removed from the Internet but that the children in the imagery may be identified and safeguarded.

We only review and assess material that is reported to Hotline.ie by the public. Additionally, when an Analyst uncovers, in the course of assessing a public report, obvious references/ links suggesting further child sexual abuse material, the Analyst will follow said instructions, examine the content and action it accordingly. Under currently approved operational procedures, by the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána, Hotline.ie is not allowed to pro-actively search for CSAM on the Internet.

Purpose:

The Hotline.ie Annual Report aims to highlight the challenges and achievements in tackling the distribution, availability, and proliferation of child sexual abuse and exploitation online. It provides an overview of the important work we carry out, outlines key statistical findings from the year gone by and contextualizes our work in relation to the wider national and international efforts to combat child sexual abuse.

We have undoubtedly achieved a great deal since our inception in 1999, however we know it is imperative that we continue to adapt and evolve to ensure collaborative national, European and international efforts to further protect children across the world.

The Dataset:

The dataset, unless otherwise specified, refers to the period from January 1st to December 31st 2020. The figures and findings included in this publication are predicated only on reports received from the public by Hotline.ie. These should not be interpreted as being indicative of the full extent of child sexual abuse production, distribution, consumption and even commercialisation.

The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.



Statistics & findings: at a glance

1 in 4 

reports led to child sexual abuse material

in 2020, a quarter (2,852) of all publicly sourced reports (10,583) were classified as CSAM leads.

42% 

of CSAM reports were indicative of a commercial nature

commercial CSAM refers to material which in our professional opinion appears to have been produced or it is being used for the purpose of financial gain by the distributor.

142% 

increase in CSAM which appeared to be self-generated imagery or videos

the material predominately featured girls under the age of 15 engaging in explicit sexual activity on webcams. Hotline.ie Analysts also noted that signs of coercion or grooming were often present.

1 in 2 

CSAM reports included video content

55% increase over 2019, in leads displaying child sexual abuse videos.

51% 

of all the CSAM leads ever identified by Hotline.ie were recorded in the last two years, namely 2019 and 2020.

*Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number

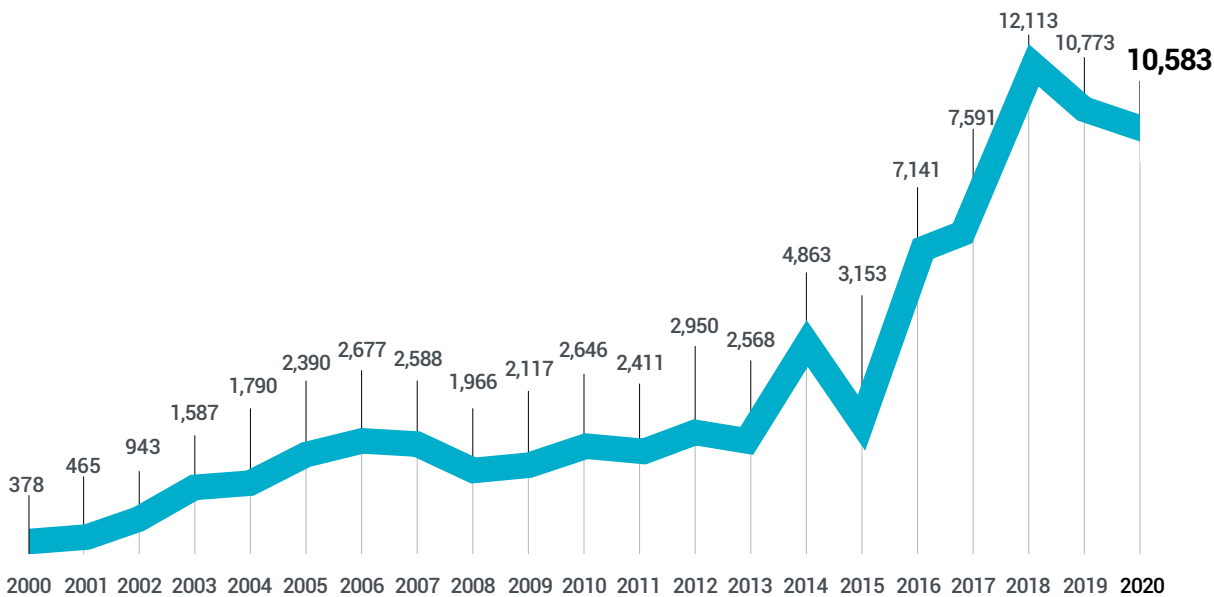
Statistics & findings: volume of reports received in 2020

2020 is the third consecutive year, since inception two decades ago, when Hotline.ie received over 10,000 public reports, 10,583. This figure is comparable to the year previous, 10,773.

One report refers to a “single” publicly-sourced reference of suspected illegal online content (i.e. a website) received by Hotline.ie. In most cases the “single” reference contains, displays or leads to hundreds of items (i.e. images, videos, list of hyperlinks to other webpages, etc).

In 2020, over 78% of the reports were submitted under CSAM suspicion with a further 9% suspected financial scams and hate-related offences. The remainder fell outside the specific

remit of Hotline.ie, i.e. privacy violations, material that promoted suicide, extreme violence, copyright infringement, etc. Whether within the remit of Hotline.ie or outside of it, each report is met with due diligence and the concerns of the reporter (anonymous or not) are never dismissed. When contact information is provided by the reporter, and where possible our Analysts provide assistance as applicable.



Annual volume of reports received by Hotline.ie

1 report = from 10(s) to 100(s) of images

83,693

Total reports

3,985

Average

were received over the last 20 years

2000-2020



Each report we received within the Hotline.ie remit is assessed in accordance with rigorous standards and by reference to Irish law, namely the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 (as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017), and the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989. As Hotline.ie Analysts, we only assess content in accordance to the criteria and thresholds set out in the Irish law and do not make moral or subjective judgements as to what type of content should or should not be on the Internet.

Alex, Hotline.ie Analyst



Breakdown by reporting channel

Publicly-sourced reports	8,293
Derived reports	2,290



Total 2020 reports	10,583
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Breakdown by Hotline.ie classification

Content already removed	552
Non-actionable reports	2,368
Insufficient detail	571
Outside Hotline.ie remit	626
Other (not found & not accessible)	1,171

NOT-illegal (Total)	4,771
Adult pornography	2,341
Extreme adult content	707
Age inappropriate child posing	515
Other Not-Illegal	1,208

ILLEGAL (Total)	2,892
Child pornography (CSAM)	2,852
Racism and xenophobia	22
Financial scam	18

Analyst Testimonial: Break the Cycle



Although it's been close to two years, a statement from CARI* has stuck with me "One client, a 13 year old girl who was sexually assaulted whilst walking through the park with her friends said *"When I realised the whole school had seen the video of my sexual assault, I wanted to die... the sharing of that video was worse than the assault."* Knowing that I play a part in the prevention of re-victimisation of children who have suffered from sexual abuse drives my work every day and motivates me to assess and analyse some of the most reprehensible content imaginable.

Understandably, for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, the knowledge that their abuse has been captured and shared online can be extremely daunting and can lead to post-traumatic stress, re-victimisation, and prolonged suffering.

Each repeat viewing and/or sharing of CSAM online it's not a victimless crime. It constitutes the re-victimisation of the child and a continued violation of their rights. In reverse with each instance of CSAM that I have removed from the Internet, we break the cycle of abuse and exploitation.

It cannot be stressed enough, the public's willingness and readiness to report suspect images and videos of children that they might encounter online is also an instrumental contribution to breaking the cycle.

Even when in doubt about someone's age, it takes approximately 60 seconds to make an anonymous report to Hotline.ie. As such I urge you not to underestimate the power of one report. If you accidentally come across CSAM online, you are not powerless; you can Break the Cycle, one report at a time!

Sean, Hotline.ie Analyst

*Children At Risk in Ireland Foundation, for more details visit www.cari.ie

Statistics & findings: reports classified as child sexual abuse material

When analysing the methods utilised for CSAM distribution, our Analysts have noted that perpetrators do not abandon “old” platforms to move with the latest. In many cases perpetrators learn to exploit existing technology for the production and distribution of CSAM across all available digital mediums. Our findings reveal that the distribution of CSAM is often a “journey” with some services acting as gateway for users to find “end destination” services that make available CSAM.

In 2020, our Analysts confirmed 2,852 CSAM leads. Each of these publicly-sourced reports constituted a single URL pointing towards a location on the Internet. These should not generally be seen as isolated reports, but of points of investigation that tap into a wider network of CSAM distribution. In the course of assessing these URLs, our Analysts have seen tens of thousands of images/videos displaying children being sexually abused. Each of these items are a record evidencing a crime being committed, a child being sexually abused and more often raped and further exploited.

As a proportion of all 2020 reports, one in four were found to lead to CSAM.



The graphic above showcases a clear and continual annual upward trend in the amount of confirmed CSAM leads. Looking at the annual figure in comparison to the average number of reports over the last twenty-one years, one can note the dramatic surge in CSAM leads, particularly since 2018 with 2020 marking over four times the average.

Statistics & findings: the children in the imagery

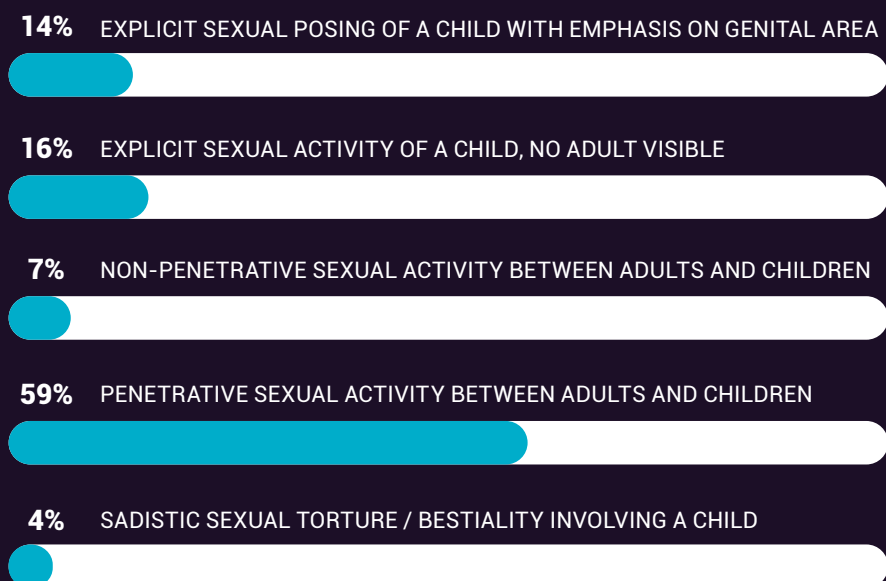
Gender breakdown



Age breakdown



Severity



a & **b** 63% of which 83% pre-pubescent children & infant (2.6%)

Statistics & findings: CSAM distribution



A single confirmed case of CSAM is rarely an isolated occurrence; each URL usually acts as an entry point into a larger network distributing CSAM. At which point the entry occurs is subject to what is reported, however we have taken note that these networks of distribution are usually designed to avoid a single point of failure.

Sean, Hotline.ie Analyst

In recent years, our Analyst noted that certain online services tend to be misused to act as 'gateway' points while others as 'end-destinations'. For example, chatrooms may be used to converse and exchange links, which in turn would lead to a video-streaming website.

Our 2020 findings reveal banner/link sites as the top gateway, accounting for 27% of all CSAM leads. These sites would advertise or display lists of links to CSAM. On the other hand, the top end-destination identified by our Analysts were cyberlockers (45%), in most cases consisting of hundreds of gallery-style repositories.

In some cases, a single gateway linked to multiple different end-destinations spread across different hosters and jurisdictions.



The process of locating and removing CSAM is more of a challenge now than it ever has been before. In the past we saw single reports, alerting us to content at a specific static web location. Today however, as an Analyst, I am often required to follow a trail across multiple sites and services, all of which are being exploited by offenders in their efforts to avoid detection and removal of content. This represents a unique challenge which I believe will become increasingly relevant in the coming years as offenders are becoming more agile and technically adapt in exploiting both existing and emerging technologies.

Sean, Hotline.ie Analyst

27%

of all CSAM leads
in 2020 came from
banner/link sites

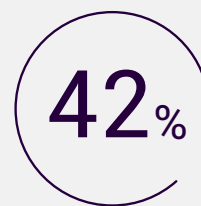
Statistics & findings: CSAM distribution



From what we can see, these distribution networks are engineered in such a manner to prolong the lifespan (remain active on the Internet) for as long as possible. At the most basic level: if the 'gateway' is taken down the CSAM will still remain accessible online at source, whilst if the source is removed the gateway could be reconfigured to point to different CSAM sources. Thus, the most effective approach is to remove the content at source and the gateway. However, the techniques to disguise these intricate networks are ever evolving and so it remains imperative to maintain pace. [Eoin, Hotline.ie Analyst](#)

At Hotline.ie we use the term "commercial" CSAM to refer to images and videos which in our professional opinion appear to have been produced or are being used for the purpose of financial gain by the distributor. In 2020 we have recorded a significant increase in commercial CSAM discovery, namely 31% in comparison to 2019 figures.

In 2020, 42% of all CSAM leads were identified as containing a commercial element. At times, a 'gateway' can display child sexual abuse 'preview' images or videos, claiming corresponding galleries to be unlocked upon payment. Our Analysts have noted a similar method being employed on the darknet, with sites displaying child sexual abuse imagery on the homepage and requesting payment to be made to gain access to the rest of the site. There appears to be an increasing trend in requesting cryptocurrency payment instead of more traditional and traceable alternatives. This is an issue of grave concern, which could indicate that certain individuals see this as a market to exploit, with the inherited risk brought by demand. Our own statistics suggest this is a growing trend, with a 31% increase in commercialised CSAM compared to 2019. The significance of the rise we have witnessed in 2020 is yet to be deciphered.



of all CSAM leads were identified as containing a commercial element in 2020



It is an unfortunate reality that some people seek to profit from the sexual abuse of children. As an Analyst, I've often seen a commercial element associated with the sharing and distribution of CSAM online. While this profiteering is undoubtedly reprehensible, it is an issue which appears to have leapt to the fore in recent years.

[Alex, Hotline.ie Analyst](#)

Statistics & findings: snapshot of CSAM hosting patterns

Throughout 2020, Hotline.ie traced CSAM to 31 countries worldwide inclusive of Ireland. Our expert Analysts use at least three methods to trace and determine the geographical Internet location of where CSAM is hosted at the time of assessment. This allows us to work in collaboration with relevant partner hotline(s) to have the illegal content removed at source as quickly as possible.

For the avoidance of doubt, CSAM hosting figures specifically indicate where content is located at a specific instance of time. By no means should these figures be misconstrued as a full scale representation of the production and consumption of child sexual abuse imagery in a given jurisdiction. Oftentimes, a child victim may be sexually abused in one country, the images of the abuse uploaded to the Internet in a different country, hosted on servers in yet another, whilst the content is accessible across the world. Child sexual abuse is a transnational crime and perpetrators belong to every nationality, gender and socio-economic status as is also true for their victims.

In 2020, 17 CSAM leads were traced to Ireland. While the hosting level remains low, particularly when compared to other countries in Europe; it is of vital importance to use all reasonable efforts to ensure Ireland remains a hostile hosting environment for child sexual abuse and

exploitation. Hotline.ie has had considerable success in having illegal content taken down by Irish based online service providers within an average of 24 hours from Hotline.ie Notice for Takedown. We are pleased to report that there has been total compliance with all Notices for Takedown issued by Hotline.ie since its inception.

Unfortunately, there are numerous examples across the world where countries have seen their hosting figures soar as they have been suddenly targeted by CSAM distributors.

It is abundantly clear that Ireland must continue to maintain a strong focus on tackling these crimes against children, whilst it is equally clear that those intent on illegal activities are agile in their efforts to evade detection, the law and associated regulations and continue to dynamically move around the digital world to do so.

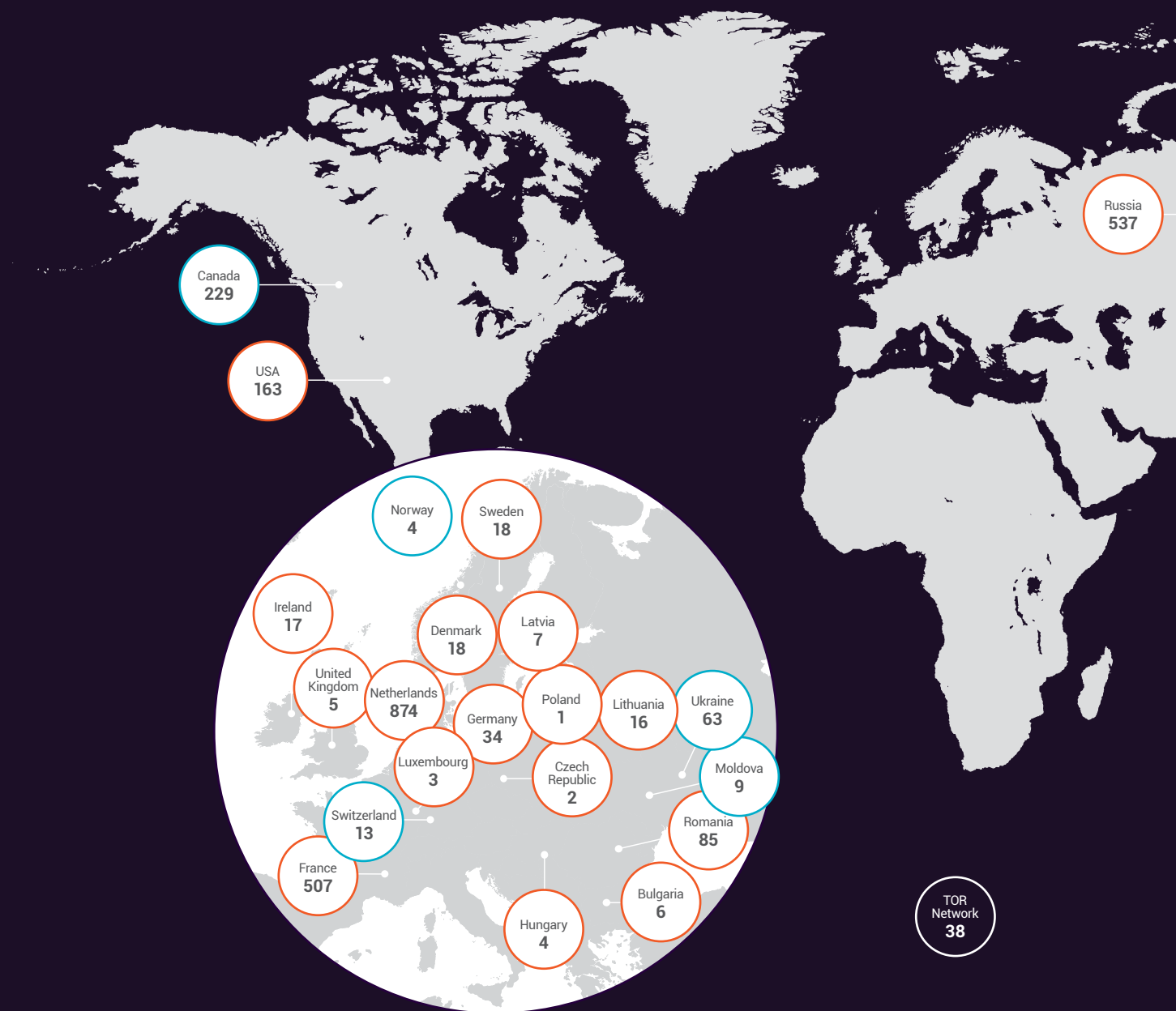
31

In 2020 Hotline.ie
traced CSAM to
31 countries
worldwide



As Analysts, we work to swiftly and accurately trace CSAM, regardless of where in the world it might be hosted, alert law enforcement and the relevant national hotline from the INHOPE network, and thus break the cycle of abuse and exploitation by having CSAM removed at source. Given the trust we have built over the years as a network of Analysts through international training and collaboration, there is now a global network of professionals working to create a safer world for children and make the Internet a safer place for everyone to use. **Sean, Hotline.ie Analyst**

Statistics & findings: snapshot of CSAM hosting patterns



The world map infographic shows where child sexual abuse imagery identified by Hotline.ie was hosted in 2020 (based on geographic IP lookups).



-  INHOPE member hotline
-  Country without INHOPE member hotline presence
-  Location not determined, i.e. TOR (.onion)

COUNTRIES

31

11 countries without INHOPE member hotline presence

CSAM HOSTED IN IRELAND

0.6%

CSAM HOSTED IN EUROPE

56%

CSAM TOR NETWORK*

1.3%

(*the originating Internet location of the content could not be determined)

A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

Working collaboratively, in partnership - NGOs and charities, law enforcement agencies, experts, researchers and academia, Internet Industry, policymakers, parents and educators - is key for a paradigm shift in effectively combating these transnational crimes against children.

In September 2020, RTE Radio 1 released 'Age, Sex, Location' radio documentary, first of its kind, to shine a light on a topic that not many people want to talk about or even acknowledge it exists, namely how children are being sexual exploitation by online predators.

The Hotline.ie team worked with Sinead Kennedy, Nicoline Greer and the RTE Doc on One team; the outcome a powerful, sensitively made and multifaceted 43 minute radio documentary into one of the most serious crimes against children, the life-lasting impact on victims and survivors alike, and the work of frontline responders in making the digital world a safer place, particularly for children and young people.

In this documentary you hear accounts from a survivor (Rhiannon was 13 when a stranger started talking to her online), Hotline.ie and IWF (the UK hotline) Analysts, and Detective Sergeant Mike Smyth who works in the Online Child Exploitation Unit, An Garda Síochána.

The RTE radio documentary is available as a podcast online (See link below). Whilst the topic is undoubtedly unsettling and makes for a tough listen, we believe it is an important one particularly with the reality of self-generated indecent or sexually explicit images taken by children and young people under the age of 18, on the rise now more than ever before. The cost of not knowing might be immense.

[https://www.rte.ie/radio1/
doconone/2020/0903/1162936
-age-sex-location/](https://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2020/0903/1162936-age-sex-location/)

Working in partnership with 46 other hotlines worldwide, as part of the INHOPE network

In 1999, Hotline.ie alongside seven other organisations co-founded the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE). Today, the INHOPE network spans the globe with 47 Internet hotlines in over 40 countries (all EU Member States, the UK, Russia, South Africa, North & South America, Asia, Australia and New Zealand).

INHOPE's raison d'être and mission is to support and enhance the work of member hotlines engaged in combating online CSAM by, for example, maintaining the EU-funded CSAM report management system (ICCAM) which enables hotlines to securely exchange CSAM reports between different jurisdictions.

INHOPE and INTERPOL hold regular joint content assessment training sessions for hotline Analysts to ensure consistency of the assessment process on all levels. To that end, all Hotline.ie Analysts have been certified, subsequent to the completion of INHOPE/INTERPOL training sessions.

In 2014, INHOPE launched the Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) with the view of ensuring enhanced compliance and an optimal standard of hotline operation by existing and new members alike.

Since the inception of the INHOPE QAP, Hotline.ie has been assessed twice by independent experts and each time found to be compliant and exceeding the minimum standard requirements. We were subsequently awarded the INHOPE Quality Assurance Certification for excellent hotline service and standard of operation in 2015 and more recently, in 2018.

Through the INHOPE network, we work with a diverse mix of government agencies, inter-governmental bodies, law enforcement agencies and NGOs. We actively participate in INHOPE Task Groups and share our expertise, whilst drawing from the collective multi-disciplinary expertise within the INHOPE network.





An Garda Síochána is once again delighted to contribute to the Hotline.ie Annual Report. We continue our long and successful partnership with Hotline.ie, which has one overall aim, the protection of children. Hotline.ie serves as a key ally of An Garda Síochána in combatting online child exploitation. The increasing volume of reports to Hotline.ie highlights the valuable and necessary work undertaken by the dedicated staff at Hotline.ie.

Declan Daly, Detective Chief Superintendent,
Garda National Protective Services Bureau

Working in partnership with law enforcement

Child sexual abuse is a transnational crime, where a child victim may be sexually abused in one country, the images of the abuse uploaded to the Internet in another, hosted on servers in yet another country and the content accessible from anywhere in the world.

In recent years, the distribution of CSAM online has become more dynamic. Our Analysts have noted certain CSAM dedicated websites moving across hosting providers in different countries and advertising the content across various online services and platforms. Some might even frequently change the URLs associated with their websites, the domains, as well as their image stores and online payment mechanism.

Due to rapid online CSAM movement patterns, content reported in one jurisdiction almost always ends up being traced to another jurisdiction, which has been captured statistically by Ireland, the UK, Austria and most other hotlines in the INHOPE network.

As such, uninterrupted hotline service together with international multi-stakeholder cooperation is key in combatting the availability and proliferation of child sexual abuse and exploitation online.

Tackling online child sexual abuse material requires at minimum a two-fold approach, namely the swift removal of CSAM from the Internet, and ensuring the children in the images may be identified and safeguarded, whilst the perpetrators identified and brought to justice. And that's why working in partnership with law enforcement is of utmost importance.

Our highly skilled Analysts sift through thousands of public reports leading to hundreds of thousands of images and videos to identify quality leads. The content classified as most probably illegal "child pornography" under Irish law is submitted to the Paedophile Investigation Unit of the Garda National Protective Services Bureau. We used the term "probably illegal" as only a court of law can make a judgement as to whether something is definitively illegal under the law.

Hotline.ie's triage function should not be misconstrued as criminal investigation which together with evidence gathering to support criminal proceedings is a matter for law enforcement alone.

We also work closely with 46 other hotlines around the world (INHOPE network), and we alert our counterparts when we find child sexual abuse content hosted in their country. We do so through the EU-funded international CSAM report management system (ICCAM).

ICCAM enables INHOPE member hotlines to securely forward CSAM reports between different jurisdictions, whilst also making the content directly available to INTERPOL. Subsequently to INTERPOL's validation the CSAM is added to INTERPOL's Child Sexual Exploitation database (ICSE).

Our Members

27 companies, including some of the giants of the Internet world through to smaller online service providers operating in Ireland, chose to actively support Hotline.ie in our mission to tackle the distribution and proliferation of child sexual abuse and exploitation online.



Working in partnership with our Members, online service providers operating in Ireland

All our members abide by the Hotline.ie Code of Practice, which outlines the framework for collaboration between Hotline.ie, participating companies, and An Garda Síochána for the purpose of countering illegal content online, especially child sexual abuse material. Amongst other things, the Code sets out Minimum Requirements and details the Notice and Takedown procedure, roles and responsibilities.

 Blacknight is happy to support the work of the Hotline.ie. While we love the Internet we are all too conscious that it can and is abused by criminals and those that prey on the youngest members of our society are truly abhorrent. Hotline.ie and its partners do stellar work mitigating this horrible activity.

Michele Neylon, co-founder and CEO
of Blacknight Solutions

 Westnet is proud to have been a Hotline.ie member since 2013. Over the past eight years we have supported the important work carried out by Hotline.ie in eliminating the scourge of CSAM from the Internet, and will continue to do so. By prominently displaying the Hotline.ie logo on our website's front page we encourage our customers, and indeed all visitors to the site, to play their part in reporting suspected CSAM. Every abusive image removed from the Internet is one more valuable step towards breaking the cycle of child abuse and exploitation.

Paul Cunnane, Director, Westnet

 Online safety is crucially important, and the difficult work that Hotline.ie does in tackling the spread of CSAM material is particularly commendable. As new members of Hotline.ie we are committed to supporting its vital work, working alongside other key stakeholders in this area, including ISPs, the Department of Justice and Equality and An Garda Síochána.

Mark Carpenter, Director of Regulatory
& Corporate Affairs, Sky Ireland

 HEAnet is proud to be a member of Hotline.ie and applaud their work. Hotline.ie are playing a crucial role in making the internet a better, safer place. We are looking forward to supporting Hotline.ie in the future so they can continue spreading the message of zero-tolerance to CSAM and ultimately Break the Cycle.

Brian Nisbet, Service Operations Manager,
HEAnet, Ireland's National Education
and Research Network

 At Tesco Mobile, the protection of children is paramount. We are fully committed to the invaluable service provided by Hotline.ie, helping us and our customers to 'break the cycle' by reporting suspected illegal CSAI content on the Internet. This work is critical to making the internet a safer and more inclusive digital environment.

Ciaran Melia, General Manager,
Tesco Mobile Ireland

The Irish Safer Internet Centre

Unlike any other organisation in this space, the Irish Safer Internet Centre partners share skills and expertise to identify emerging online threats, take direct action against them through the delivery of evidence-based services, resources and programmes, whilst providing support to children, young people, parents, teachers, with an end-to-end approach.

What are Safer Internet Centres (SICs)?

- SICs are national hubs which provide a suite of complementary essential services in synergy with the four pillars of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children, namely (1) promoting positive online experience for children; (2) awareness and empowerment (including digital/media literacy); (3) creating a safe environment for children; and (4) combatting online CSAM.
- SICs are co-financed by the European Union under the Connecting Europe Facility Safer Internet Programme and usually offer three kinds of services: a national awareness centre, a helpline and a hotline.



Co-financed by the European Union
Connecting Europe Facility

The Irish Safer Internet Centre provides:

1. Ireland's primary national channel for the public to securely, anonymously and confidentially report suspected illegal content online. www.hotline.ie
2. The Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre, Webwise. Among other things, Webwise develop youth oriented awareness raising resources and training programmes that promote digital citizenship and address topics such as online wellbeing, cyber-bullying and more. Webwise also organise and coordinate the annual Irish Safer Internet Day events. www.webwise.ie
3. 24/7 free confidential listening services for all children up to the age of 18 in Ireland, delivered by the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC). www.childline.ie
4. Free and confidential helpline service for parents and guardians, delivered by the National Parents Council Primary (NPC). The NPC also provide online and face to face training courses for parents. www.npc.ie

The Irish Safer Internet Centre vision is a positive and inclusive digital world where children are safe and protected.

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Hotline.ie is central to national and international efforts to tackle online child sexual abuse and make the Internet a safer place for children. Webwise are delighted to support the work of Hotline.ie as part of the Irish Safer Internet Centre. Together, the Irish Safer Internet Centre promotes safer, better Internet use through education, awareness and support for children, parents and educators.

Jane McGarrigle, Project Officer - Webwise, PDST Technology in Education



I congratulate Hotline.ie, our partners in the Irish Safer Internet Centre, on another impactful year. 'Breaking the cycle' of CSAM online is key to lessening the proliferation of these abusive images and the subsequent re-victimisation of the child. Child sexual abuse is an issue we need to be talking about more: understanding its prevalence, recognising its impact and actively and collaboratively working together on protecting against it.

John Church, ISPCC Childline Chief Executive

The Irish Safer Internet Centre is a partnership of four leading organisations: Hotline.ie, Webwise Ireland, ISPCC and NPC. The Centre is coordinated by the Department of Justice, Cybercrime. The consortium has been appointed over a decade ago by the European Commission as the Safer Internet Centre in Ireland, and is one of 31 SICs across all EU Member States, the UK, Iceland and Norway. It is integral part of the INSAFE-INHOPE network.

Glossary of terms

General terminology

An Garda Síochána: Ireland's National Police Service

Banner/Link site: a website or a webpage comprised of adverts for other websites and/or text links or images that (re)direct to a third-party website when you click on them.

Cyberlocker: an online service specifically designed to host (store) users' files, which allows users to upload/download content.

Commercial CSAM: term used to refer to content which has been adjudged to have been produced, used, distributed or intended for the purpose of financial gain, whether that is directly through membership fees, traditional payment methods, cryptocurrencies, or indirectly i.e. digital advertising networks or other methods.
End-destination service: term used to describe an online service where CSAM has been found by our Analysts e.g. a video streaming website.

Forum: an online medium whereby users can talk, post, or discuss certain topics with others. Each forum tends to contain numerous sub-threads relating to different topics where users can reply to other posts and contribute to the topic.

Gateway service: term used to refer to an online service which our Analysts have found to (re)direct, lead, or link to CSAM e.g. a forum post sharing a link to a CSAM website.

Image host / image hosting site: an online image hosting service allows users to upload images which are then available / accessible through a unique URL (link). This URL can also be embedded in websites, forums and social networking sites.

Notice and Takedown: is the process through which child sexual abuse images and videos are removed from the Internet.

Report: one report refers to a "single" publicly-sourced reference of suspected illegal content online (e.g. a website) received by Hotline.ie. In most cases the "single" reference contains, displays or leads to hundreds of items (i.e. images, videos, list of hyperlinks to other webpages, etc.).

Self-generated sexually explicit content involving a child/children: term used to describe sexually explicit imagery or videos taken by children and adolescents under the age of 18, where no adult is visible in the imagery. Whilst such content might be initially shared with innocent intent, i.e. within the context of a romantic relationship between older teenagers, it can find its way to "collectors" who might attempt to exploit the child into producing more content for example. With any self-generated sexual content depicting a younger child, the assumption ought to be that it is highly likely for it to be the result of a coercive relationship or online grooming, be it by an adult or even peer to peer. When tackling self-generated sexually explicit content involving a child the context can be very important.

URL: an acronym for Uniform Resource Locator. A URL is the specific Internet location where a file is saved. For example, the URL of the Hotline.ie Code of Practice, which is displayed on [www.hotline.ie](https://www.hotline.ie/library/hotlineie-code-of-practice-2020.pdf) is <https://www.hotline.ie/library/hotlineie-code-of-practice-2020.pdf>.

Webpage: a document which can be viewed using a web browser. A single webpage can hold a myriad of images, text, videos, or (hyper) links; where many website will have several webpages.

Website: a website is a set of related webpages typically served from a single web domain; most websites would have several webpages. Hotline.ie content classifications (other than illegal)

Terminology: Hotline.ie classifications (other than illegal)

Not illegal: overarching category which incorporates four individual classifications: adult pornography, extreme adult content, age-inappropriate child posing and other not illegal. When our Analysts assess content as not contrary to Irish law, it is subsequently classified as “not illegal”, which in turn means no further action is required / will be taken by Hotline.ie.

Adult pornography: this classification is applied when the individual(s) featured in sexually explicit content is/are assessed to be over the age of 18.

Extreme adult content: this classification refers to content which does not meet the threshold of illegality under the Irish law, but could be of a violent nature or upsetting to certain people.

Age-inappropriate child posing: the classification refers to imagery which does not meet the threshold set out in the Irish law for “child pornography” but may contain age-inappropriate or sexualised content involving children, e.g. a child in swimwear posing explicitly. Note: if the image is hosted in Ireland and accompanied by additional contextual information, for example, sexual comments, our Analysts will reach out to the online service provider seeking the content’s removal under the Hotline.ie Code of Practice or their own terms and conditions / community guidelines.

Other not illegal: this classification is applied when the content does not breach Irish law and does not fall into one of the three categories already mentioned, for example: reports about unusual news articles, satire, YouTube videos of children arguing, etc.

Non-actionable reports: overarching category, which incorporates four individual classifications: insufficient detail; outside Hotline.ie remit; not accessible; and not found.

Insufficient detail: this classification is assigned when a reporter does not provide enough

information for our Analysts to ascertain which content is being reported or how to access it. This would occur for example if a specific URL (link) is not provided, or if a large website is referred without any indication of suspicion, or the content that is being reported, or how/where to find it.

Outside Hotline.ie remit: the classification refers to any issues which are not covered by Hotline.ie stated remit, such as but not limited to: copyright infringement, sale of drugs, sale of documents or personal data etc.

Not accessible: classification assigned when our Analysts cannot access the online content that is being referred e.g. the domain is not found to exist, if the site requires payment, etc.

Not found: this classification is recorded when, for example, a 404 error “page not found” is returned.

Content already removed: this classification is assigned when the reported webpage clearly states that the content was removed. This may occur when, for example, the content owner no longer wishes to make it available and has deleted it; the content was actioned in the meantime through other means; or it was in breach of the online service provider terms & conditions. In this event, our Analysts have no way of knowing beyond any reasonable doubt whether the content would have been potentially illegal under the Irish law, and as such the only classification that can be assigned is content already removed.

Query: in some cases queries submitted to Hotline.ie may progress to a full report. Members of the public wishing to submit a query or to receive a report acknowledgement and response should ensure to include a name and email address when submitting their report. Any personal data relating to a non-anonymous report will be deleted within ninety days from completion of the assessment. For more details please read our Privacy Statement available on www.hotline.ie.

Break the cycle. One report at a time.

What can you do?

1

You can help: if you suspect it, report it!
It takes 60 seconds to make an anonymous report to Hotline.ie.

2

Join us in the fight, support us in our mission, become a member.

3

Keep listening, keep learning, speak up.

4

Be an advocate.

Our work continues every day.

Break the cycle. One report at a time.

While we hope you never come across child sexual abuse imagery on the Internet, if you ever stumble across sexual images and videos of under 18s online, do the right thing by reporting those to Hotline.ie.

It takes 60 seconds to make an anonymous report to www.hotline.ie/contact-us/report

We don't need your details, just your help! Thank you.