

How Online Platforms are Used by Child Predators and

What are the effective preventive measures?

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Abstract

As technology has evolved greatly in the twenty-first century alone, younger generations have had an opportunity to grow up with devices at their fingertips none have ever before. This accessibility has strengthened their ability of quick use, skill, and a strong feeling of comfort with using and having access to technology. There seems to be more children with access to the internet than there are without, but there is also an ongoing issue behind the screens.

The rates of child-sex trafficking have also been on the rise during this time, the numbers of victims rapidly growing at rates they had never been before. An increase multiplying the rate of growth each year would mean there has to be higher interactions between children and predators, long enough for the traffickers to lure them. Technology offers various routes in which traffickers could take advantage of in pursuit of their endeavors, allowing them to be surfing numerous sites nearly simultaneously in milliseconds.

This paper investigates how online platforms are used by child predators and what are effective preventative measures? It concludes that seeking youth-targeted applications accompanied by an internal or external chatting feature is primarily the methodology of predators. The paper also entails that preventive measures range from general knowledge on the crime to advocating for proper legislation.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most exciting things for a child nowadays is when they are able to convince their parents to allow them to download a game on their phone, get their own iPad, or start playing on the computer that sits in the office. No matter what device it may be, it all

revolves around screen time, and this is not uncommon for children. According to their website, the National Center for Education Statistics is the primary source of information funded and run federally regarding the survey of educational data. They report that in the 2019 ACS census that some 95 percent of 3 to 18 year olds have access to the internet, 87 percent through computer and mobile phone and 5 through exclusively mobile phone in the United States.

Notably, this growth in internet access for children is likely due mainly to the demand of internet access by educational establishments integrating more technology into classrooms in recent years, but access to internet often does not end with schooldays and schoolwork. Many have underestimated what accessibility as large as it is, the human nature of curiosity, and the world at your fingertips really entails. Unmonitored access to the internet accompanied by lack of awareness can lead to serious adverse consequences. However, the purpose of this research paper is to explore and educate on how online platforms are used by child predators and what are the effective preventive measures?

Beyond a Hypothetical

There is a common misconception in life that something could never happen to you. That it is not likely, you are too smart, etc. With a population of 7.83 billion people in the world and 4.66 billion being *active* internet users, the daily interactions anyone could face are only growing in abundance (Johnson, 2021). There may be a bit of truth that child sex trafficking will not happen to you, that is if you are at or above the age of adulthood, but that does not mean you are not subject to the reality the cybercrime holds.

Amelia was 9 years old. She loved gymnastics, making slime, and playing computer games. Amelia was also 9 years old when she alarmingly started showing signs of severe depression and despite her parents attempts she refused to talk to the psychiatrist. Eventually she

came forward that someone was introducing her to sex online. Her parents were shocked, believing they took all the right steps by blocking downloads, adult-content, and having child locks on, but the last place they thought their child would be getting ployed was on a game created for kids.

Predator's Playground

Sadly, Amelia's story does not come as a shock when looking at the numbers. Data shows that in the United States approximately 40 percent of sex trafficking victims are recruited online. This makes the internet the most common place to lure victims in (United Nations, 2021). Of course this was not always the case, but as technology has drove change in nearly every industry, it is understandable for the methodology of sex trafficking to have been redirected. The criminal justice system is held responsible for most of the work towards prevention and reaction to cybercrime. Agent Kaufman of the FBI remarks that, "anywhere where people have access to the internet and access to kids, some people are going to try to use it as a tool to lure kids out," despite the efforts of parents such as Amelia's, predators are everywhere children are (Johnston, 2019).

Not all of the games where children are trafficked are as simple as for 9 year olds though, and with that comes complexity. Gaming nowadays has grown into a huge entertainment and business opportunity across the globe, attracting gamers and creators all with the same love. There are many games with internal chat rooms, but even when they do not have them, there are various other softwares made for voice, video, and both private and public chatting channels. To put it into perspective just how often chatting engines like this are used, the metrics for Discord, a VoIP (Voice of internet protocol) stated on their website are 150 million monthly active users, 19 million active servers a week, and 4 billion server conversation minutes daily.

Another active platform is social media, with Youtube, Facebook, and Whatsapp attracting the most traffic and there being 4.14 billion active social media users (Statista, 2021). Although many social media applications offer safety measures such as the choice of private or public accounts, age restrictions, and graphic warnings the measures can easily be disabled or bypassed since no verification is required for settings such as age. There is also the installment of private messaging on many applications, some where the messages stay until deleted, some where the messages last 24 hours, and others that delete once viewed.

The Crime

Between gaming, social media, there are abundant modes of communication for predators to find children. This leaves law enforcement continuously catching up as updates and inventions are made (Johnston, 2019). Predator's often use fear tactics as they did in the Northshore Mums antidote about Amelia. The aggressor told her if she told anyone that they would both go to jail. These tactics contribute to why this cybercrime is often wildly underreported despite the huge psychological damage it has on the children involved, but the predators are still focused on building trust and interest of the children. Detective Kaufman has found that when these relationships are built on games, it is typical for monetary incentives or gifts to be sent in hopes to lure children in exchange for photos or meeting up (Johnston, 2019). The same goes within private messaging, that an exchange can be made and that whatever is within the chat stays there since it is "private" messaging. There is a clear desire to still profit, exploit, and take these relationships from the screens into the real world.

The rate of sex trafficking has only increased as the accessibility to the internet and the usage of technology has increased. It can not be concluded that technology is the sole reason why, but, specifically the bureau has found that chatting softwares is often the primary or secondary

interaction of a predator and victim (Johnston, 2019). To put some numbers to it, there was 35% increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation which was marked as the highest number of reports ever received in one year, totaling at 21.7 million (O'Donnell, 2021). The timeline of this plays an important role, taking into consideration that many US states had strict guidelines in place at this time due to COVID-19. Due to this restricting face-to-face interactions, it seems even more likely with the previous information discussed that the seeds of numerous of these exploitation cases were planted virtually.

The Forgotten

As common with many sexual related crimes, the stigma around victims is still negative despite the growth in occurrences. In specific, there is a shadowing over a group that is often forgotten, leaving them without resources for help to get out of the situation, and then help healing from it. A study done by EPCAT USA, the leading anti-child trafficking organization, found that the scope of CSEB (childhood sexual exploitation of boys) “is vastly under reported” and that much more progress needs to be made to “identify sexually exploited boys as young people in need of protection” from advocating on knowledge to providing resources for them (Friedman, 2018). Societally, the stereotypes placed upon boys not to be emotional, they must be assertive, strong, and so on or they are not masculine can quickly be imagined to make it harder for a victim to come forward about the abuse he is experiencing when he feels as though it strips him of those very characteristics.

Solutions

With no surprise, this will only continue to grow as more technology is created that allows quicker communication and easier use unless there is the conscious effort to combat child predators and teach internet safety. Online trafficking can help be prevented and work towards

being significantly reduced with proper communication and education on the signs. Being able to recognize the early signs is undoubtedly one of the most important skills to know. Even when there are rules in place, blockers downloaded, and check-ins done if there is a will there is a way. Utilizing these are helpful, but relying on them solely is not enough. A child trying to hide what is happening on their screens will be quick to switch tabs when one enters a room, often clear their text and call logs, have contacts they can not explain, and be very hesitant to allow a parent or guardian to use or check their phone. One who is being groomed is likely to have new items of high value with no explanation, begin self harming, have patterns of disordered eating, unwillingness to discuss internet usage, exhibiting age inappropriate sexualized behavior, and depressive moods (Raising Children Network, 2020).

Clearly, to prevent this do not avoid or brush over the topic. The only way for the severity and significance of this to be understood is by being up front and clear about sextortion and grooming. Building and maintaining healthy relationships with your children or siblings also promotes stronger emotional bonds, trust, and honesty in hopes that there is less disobedience online and that when there is a problem occurring, the child feels comfortable to seek help. From a more education standpoint, being informative on how to be safe online is key to protecting yourself and others in a wide range. It varies from your identity by using strong passphrases and two factor-authentication, knowing not to share personal information, usernames, or passcodes, understanding that once something is posted it never leaves the internet, and even things such as how to detect a spam email.

Interestingly, Virginia is one of the only states that charges survivors of sex trafficking with the crimes they were forced to commit during their entrapment. There are 1,712 survivors from 2016 to 2020 in the state (Polaris,n.d), but the limitations that fear of arrest holds over their

head could be just enough to keep them from speaking up. With numbers as high as they are, it is a community issue to provide safe havens and even go as far as to write to state senators to pass legislation in favor of supporting survivors in their healing instead of tying them down to their past. Treating a survivor as a criminal further stigmatizes sex related crime and incorrectly places responsibility and shame onto the child rather than the predator.

Conclusion

As technology advances, it will continue to intrigue various generations alike in interest. With this, the number of active internet users is suspected only to increase, welcoming more global IP traffic and connecting people faster and broader. Children are going to continue to desire to explore and experiment with technology, to fidget with the newest product on the market, to interact with their friends during summer breaks. As adults, the responsibility lies upon us to protect children in their curiosity and youth. Online platforms such as children's games, chatting channels, and social media apps are used by predators to form relationships with children. Until these applications consider plans to monitor and fight against the trafficking ploys on their websites, the number of children being sought after will only grow. Online child trafficking is a growing issue, but proper education of the platforms and crime, and familiarity of the warning signs allows a stepping stone to further combat child predators.

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