



December 2022

ONLINE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Department of Justice
Leadership and
Updated National
Strategy Needed to
Address Challenges

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105260](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The volume, complexity, and danger of sexual exploitation of children online are increasing, and have been fueled by conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to DOJ. This creates additional challenges for federal agencies, in particular law enforcement. Addressing the issue is a formidable task amid a digital landscape characterized by increasing online access, advances in technology, and increased use of encryption.

GAO was asked to review the status of federal efforts to combat the online exploitation of children, one of our most vulnerable populations, and the extent to which there is a cohesive national effort in place to address this issue. Among other things, this report: (1) describes federal government efforts to address online exploitation of children, and (2) assesses the extent to which DOJ's 2016 National Strategy to combat exploitation of children aligns with statutory requirements.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and reports. GAO interviewed federal agency, nonprofit, and industry officials with roles in addressing the online exploitation of children. GAO also analyzed the 2016 National Strategy and compared it to the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Attorney General ensure the department updates the National Strategy to fully address all statutory requirements, including appointment of a senior official, inclusion of all 19 statutory elements for the strategy, and issuance of the strategy every two years. DOJ neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-23-105260](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin, 202-512-8777, goodwing@gao.gov

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Department of Justice Leadership and Updated National Strategy Needed to Address Challenges

What GAO Found

Reports of suspected child sexual exploitation increased 35 percent from 2020 to 2021, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. To address this alarming trend, federal agencies have efforts underway to combat online exploitation of children. These efforts include task forces, technology innovation, training, and public awareness campaigns.

Children Online are at Risk of Exploitation by Predators



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105260

The Congress passed the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 which, among other things, required the Attorney General to issue a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction. The Act further required the strategy to be issued one year after enactment and updated every two years thereafter. However, as shown below, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has issued its strategy twice—in 2010 and 2016.

DOJ's Issuance of the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction from 2009 through 2021

Required year of issuance	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
Strategy issued?	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
	August 2010			April 2016			

Issued but past deadline
 Not issued

Source: Department of Justice and GAO Analysis. | GAO-23-105260

DOJ has not met a number of the requirements of the 2008 Act, due in part to it not making the strategy a priority. For example, although required by law, the department did not designate a senior management official to lead the strategy's development. Instead, DOJ rotated detailees through the position of national coordinator, and nine national coordinator detailees have held the position in the last 13 years. Further, the most recent 2016 strategy did not fully include 12 of the 19 required elements established in law, such as setting targets to accomplish quantifiable goals. Moreover, the strategy is not up-to-date on key technology advances that are making it more difficult to catch perpetrators. Addressing these issues is essential to providing assurance that an overall strategy is helping to guide the many efforts focused on protecting our children.

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Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOJ	Department of Justice
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
HSI	Homeland Security Investigations
ICAC Task Force	Internet Crimes against Children (ICAC) Task Force
NCMEC	National Center for Missing & Exploited Children
OJJDP	Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008	Providing Resources, Officers, and Technology to Eradicate Cyber Threats to Our Children Act of 2008

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December 14, 2022

Congressional Requesters

In 2021, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) received approximately 29.4 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, an increase of 35 percent from 2020.¹ That includes but is not limited to sex trafficking, sexual abuse, selling or buying of children, activities involving the sexual abuse of children, and activities related to material constituting or containing sexual abuse of children. Increased online access, new technology, and the rise of encryption are contributing to the growth in online exploitation of children, our most vulnerable population, according to the Department of Justice (DOJ). The internet has facilitated additional avenues for the exploitation of children. Specifically, it has enabled an individual or group to exploit a child online in multiple ways such as grooming, sextortion, producing and creating sexual abuse materials, and accessing or storing materials online.² The scale of sexual exploitation and abuse of children online is increasing and the sustained growth is outstripping the U.S. government's capacity and global capacity to respond, according to DOJ officials and the WeProtect Global Alliance.³ The victims range from very young children to adolescents and from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds across the globe.

¹NCMEC serves as a clearinghouse and national resource center for information related to missing and exploited children. The center also maintains the CyberTipline to receive tips concerning online exploitation of children. The public and companies that provide services online can make reports of suspected online enticement of children for sexual acts, child sexual molestation, child sexual abuse material, child sex tourism, child sex trafficking, unsolicited obscene materials sent to a child, misleading domain names, and misleading words or digital images on the internet. Over 1,800 companies have access to the CyberTipline to make reports.

²Sextortion of a minor describes a crime that happens online when an individual convinces or coerces a person who is younger than 18 to share sexual pictures or perform sexual acts on a webcam, according to DOJ and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials.

³WeProtect Global Alliance is a non-profit international organization dedicated to bringing together governments, the private sector, civil society, and international organizations to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

In 2008, Congress passed the Providing Resources, Officers, and Technology to Eradicate Cyber Threats to Our Children Act of 2008 (PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 or the Act) to combat exploitation of children.⁴ Generally, this Act required DOJ to (1) develop and implement a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction (National Strategy), (2) improve the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces,⁵ (3) increase resources for regional computer forensic labs, and (4) make other improvements to increase the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute child predators.⁶

In 2011, pursuant to the Act, we assessed the Attorney General's efforts to carry out DOJ's responsibilities under the Act. We found that the department had not implemented several provisions of the Act.⁷ In addition, we found limitations in the feedback NCMEC received from law enforcement on the usefulness of CyberTipline reports. We also found gaps with the deconfliction mechanisms law enforcement used to help prevent law enforcement agencies from pursuing the same suspected online child sexual exploitation offenders or interfering with each other's investigations. In addition, we found gaps with the backlog of forensic analysis, which could contribute to the delay, or hindrance of online exploitation of children investigations.⁸

We recommended, among other things, that the Attorney General define the steps the department planned to take and establish timeframes for completing remaining actions consistent with the Act. Although DOJ concurred with the recommendation, it did not take actions to implement it.

⁴Pub. L. No. 110-401, 122 Stat. 4229 (codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. §§ 2251, 2256, 2260, 2252A, 2258A-2258E, 2702; 34 U.S.C. §§ 21101, 21111-21117, 21131).

⁵The ICAC Task Force program is a national network of 61 coordinated task forces representing more than 5,400 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies. We discuss the task force in more detail later in this report.

⁶See *id.*

⁷GAO, *Combating Child Pornography: Steps Are Needed to Ensure That Tips to Law Enforcement Are Useful and Forensic Examinations Are Cost Effective*, [GAO-11-334](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2011).

⁸Deconfliction is the coordination and information sharing among law enforcement agencies on multi-jurisdiction investigations to help ensure officer safety and the effective use of resources.

For this report, you requested that we review the status of federal efforts to combat the online exploitation of children and the extent to which there is a cohesive national effort in place to address this issue. This report: (1) describes federal agencies' efforts to address the online exploitation of children and stakeholders' perspectives on related challenges, and (2) assesses the extent to which DOJ's national strategy to combat exploitation of children aligns with statutory requirements.

This report primarily focuses on acts related to online exploitation of children that occur when the illegal conduct is partly or entirely facilitated by the internet or other wireless communications.⁹ Accordingly, for purposes of this report, we use the term "online exploitation of children" to refer primarily to child sexual abuse material,¹⁰ extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse,¹¹ and child sex trafficking¹² that is facilitated by the internet or other wireless communications.¹³

⁹WeProtect Global Alliance, *Global Threat Assessment 2021* (provided examples such as using internet or mobile phones as a means to (1) engage or attempt to engage in child sexual exploitation; (2) persuade, induce, entice or coerce a minor to engage in any illegal sexual activity; or (3) commit an offense involving child sexual abuse material.

¹⁰Child sexual abuse material includes what is traditionally understood to be "child pornography" under 18 U.S.C. § 2256(8). The federal agency officials we spoke with, along with other stakeholders, told us that, generally, the term "child pornography" is a misnomer because the images actually depict child sexual abuse and exploitation. Accordingly, officials and stakeholders explained that they were moving away from using the term "child pornography" and instead using the term child sexual abuse material. Likewise, throughout this report, we use the term child sexual abuse material.

¹¹Extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs when perpetrators engage in sex acts with children, or produce child sexual abuse material, outside their country of citizenship. See also 18 U.S.C. § 2251 (defining "sexual exploitation of children"). According to DOJ officials, the U.S. government is increasingly moving away from the term "child sex tourism" and instead using the term "extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse."

¹²18 U.S.C. § 1591 (prohibiting, in part, activities related to causing a person under 18 to engage in a commercial sex act).

¹³A 2022 National Institute of Justice report states that crimes involving the online sexual exploitation of children involve individuals that are motivated primarily by an opportunity to sexually exploit, abuse, or control a child through sexual acts, or who are motivated to possess and distribute child sexual abuse material versus trafficking which is a crime involving commercial exploitation and forced labor. See, B.N. Levine, *Increasing the Efficacy of Investigations of Online Child Sexual Exploitation*, a special report prepared at the request of the National Institute of Justice, May 2022.

To address both objectives we conducted interviews with officials from seven federal agencies with related responsibilities to obtain information on the federal government's efforts to address online exploitation of children and their experiences with the National Strategy.¹⁴ The information obtained in our interviews is not generalizable, but provides examples of experiences and perspectives related to federal efforts to address online exploitation of children. We interviewed DOJ and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) headquarters officials knowledgeable about online exploitation of children issues to learn about their efforts specifically related to conducting investigations and prosecutions. We also interviewed officials from DOJ and DHS field offices from two states – Louisiana and Oregon. In addition, we interviewed officials from the corresponding two ICAC Task Forces located in Louisiana and Oregon to obtain their perspectives. We selected these jurisdictions due to differences in geography, laws and court decisions, and ICAC Task Force structure, among other things. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the officials we met with from DOJ and DHS headquarters, field offices, and ICAC Task Forces. These interviews included questions related to their efforts including how they conduct investigations, collaboration, and challenges they encounter conducting their work.

To address our first objective, we reviewed relevant federal laws pertaining to online exploitation of children. We also reviewed strategies, policies and procedures regarding child exploitation and conducting investigations, program guidance, and reports. This includes strategic planning documents from DOJ and DHS; the Department of State's policy on child exploitation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide; and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) ICAC Task Force Operational and Investigative Standards guidance. In addition, we reviewed reports and guidance from federal agencies related to their efforts. For instance, we reviewed the Department of State's Trafficking in Person's report; documents related to the United States Attorneys' Offices Project Safe Childhood, a DOJ National Institute of Justice report, and OJJDP annual reports regarding activities it undertakes such as efforts to combat

¹⁴The seven federal agencies included the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, State, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, and the United States Postal Inspection Service.

technology-facilitated crimes against children.¹⁵ We also analyzed all 61 of the semi-annual reports submitted by the 61 ICAC Task Forces to OJJDP for the July through December 2021 reporting period to understand their efforts, challenges, and provide context.¹⁶

In addition, we interviewed ICAC Task Force officials to obtain information on their efforts to address online exploitation of children and provide further context on the semi-annual reports. We also interviewed a West Virginia State Police official concerning the information system used by the 61 ICAC Task Forces to share and coordinate information. The West Virginia State Police developed, implemented, and maintains the information system.

To supplement our interviews with federal agencies and the ICAC Task Forces, we conducted semi-structured non-generalizable interviews with three nonprofit organizations including NCMEC. In addition, we interviewed one industry association representing leading electronic service providers, and three private electronic service providers to gather their perspectives and experiences with efforts to detect and report online exploitation of children and related outreach and education initiatives. We selected non-profit and industry organizations based on interviews with federal officials and other stakeholders who identified these organizations as having knowledge and experience in combating online exploitation of children. Although the perspectives we gathered from these interviews cannot be generalizable, they provided us with context and insights into the various efforts. In addition, we reviewed reports and studies from global non-profit organizations that work to develop educational material

¹⁵Project Safe Childhood is a DOJ initiative launched in 2006 to combat the proliferation of technology-facilitated crimes involving the sexual exploitation of children. Through a network of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies and advocacy organizations, Project Safe Childhood attempts to protect children by investigating and prosecuting offenders involved in child sexual exploitation.

¹⁶The ICAC Task Forces are required by OJJDP to submit a semi-annual report through the OJJDP JustGrants system. The semi-annual reports cover reporting periods January 1 through June 30 and July 1 through December 30 of each year. The semi-annual reports are a narrative describing the progress of each task force as it relates to the goals and objectives stated in their approved grant application by OJJDP. According to the OJJDP ICAC Task Force Commander Working Guide, the semi-annual reports should also include statistical information, task force accomplishments, and case highlights for the reporting period.

and research related to online exploitation of children, such as reports developed by the WeProtect Global Alliance.

To address the second objective, we analyzed DOJ's 2016 National Strategy and compared it to the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008, which, among other things, sets forth 19 required elements that must be included in the strategy.¹⁷ Specifically, two analysts independently conducted and recorded two separate assessments of whether the 19 elements from the Act were included in the strategy. Then, two attorneys independently reviewed the same information and recorded a separate assessment. Lastly, the two analysts and the attorneys developed a final assessment that reconciled the independent assessments and reflected their consensus.¹⁸ Additionally, we interviewed DOJ headquarters officials with responsibilities related to developing and implementing the National Strategy to further understand the status of their efforts to develop, update, and implement the National Strategy. We also interviewed officials from other federal agencies, such as DHS and the United States Postal Inspection Service to understand the extent to which they use the National Strategy.

We conducted this performance audit from July 2021 to December 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Online Exploitation of Children Defined

Federal law defines child exploitation as conduct, attempted conduct, or conspiracy to engage in conduct involving a minor¹⁹ that includes but is not limited to sex trafficking, sexual abuse, selling or buying of children,

¹⁷34 U.S.C. § 21111(c).

¹⁸We assessed whether or not DOJ's 2016 National Strategy included all 19 elements required by the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008. We did not assess the extent of DOJ's ongoing implementation of the strategy nor how the department has incorporated the strategy into its ongoing operations.

¹⁹34 U.S.C. § 21101(1) (in the context of child exploitation, defining "minor" as someone under 18 years old).

activities related to involving the sexual abuse of children, activities related to material constituting or containing child pornography, misleading domain names on the internet, misleading words or digital images on the internet, transportation of minors with the intent to engage in criminal sexual activity, or use of interstate facilities to transmit information about a minor, or any sexual activity involving a minor for which a person can be charged with a criminal offense.²⁰ This report primarily focuses on acts related to child sexual abuse material²¹ extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse²², and child sex trafficking.²³ Further, this report focuses more narrowly on online exploitation which occurs when the illegal conduct is partly or entirely facilitated by the internet or other wireless communications.²⁴ Accordingly, for purposes of this report, we use the term “online exploitation of children” to refer primarily to child sexual abuse material, extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse, and child sex trafficking that is facilitated by the internet or other wireless communications.

²⁰34 U.S.C. § 21101(1) (defining “child exploitation,” which references various sections of law that set forth “conduct” at issue).

²¹Child sexual abuse material includes what is traditionally understood to be “child pornography” under 18 U.S.C. § 2256(8). The federal agency officials we spoke with, along with other stakeholders, told us that, generally, the term “child pornography” is a misnomer because the images actually depict child sexual abuse and exploitation. Accordingly, officials and stakeholders explained that they were moving away from using the term “child pornography” and instead using the term child sexual abuse material. Likewise, throughout this report, we use the term child sexual abuse material.

²²Extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs when perpetrators engage in sex acts with children, or produce child sexual abuse material, outside their country of citizenship.” See United States Department of State, 2020 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States of America, June 2020, page 28, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/>. See also 18 U.S.C. § 2251 (defining “sexual exploitation of children”). The U.S. government is increasingly moving away from the term “child sex tourism” and instead using the term “extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse.”

²³18 U.S.C. § 1591 (prohibiting, in part, activities related to causing a person under 18 to engage in a commercial sex act).

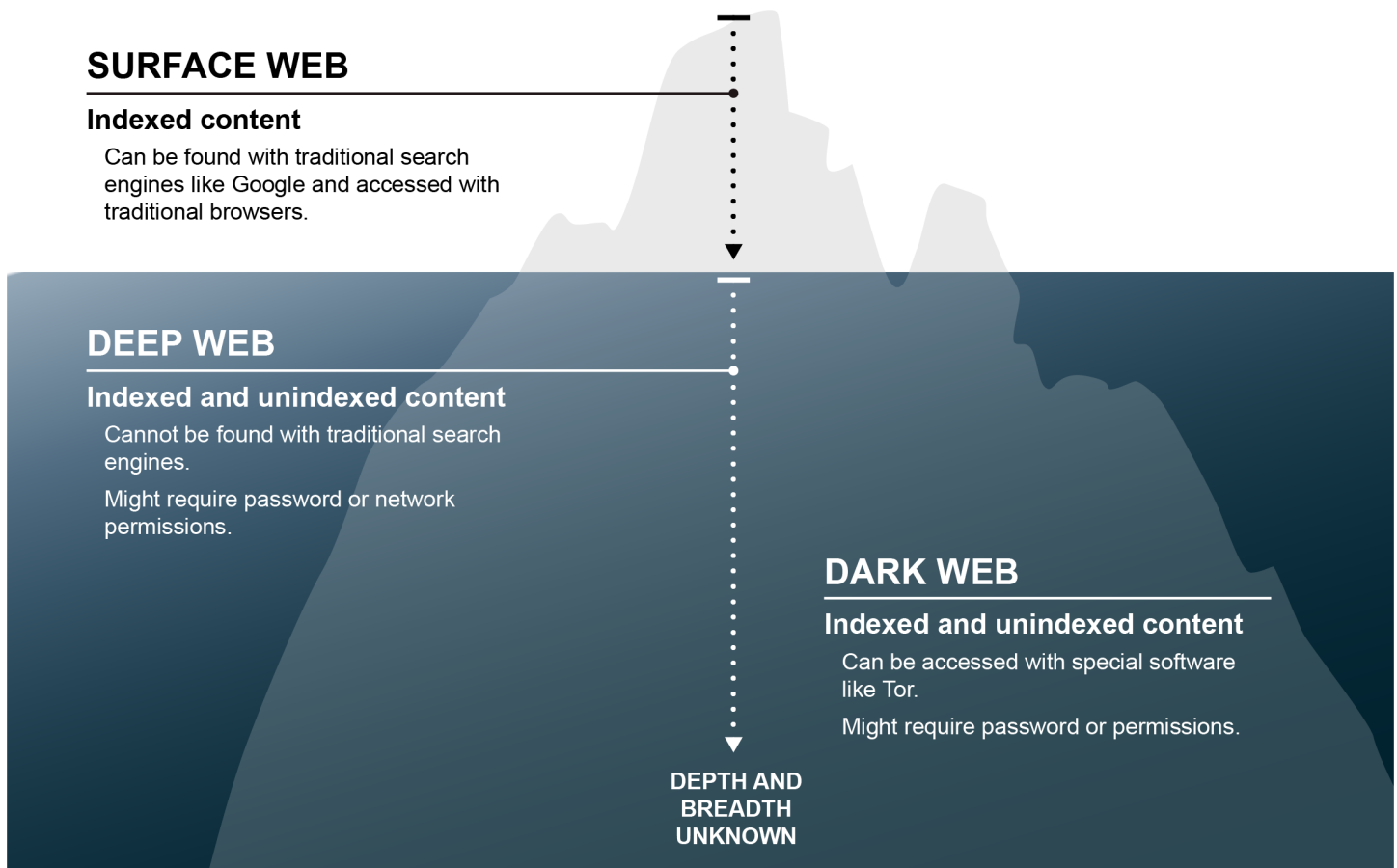
²⁴WeProtect Global Alliance, *Global Threat Assessment of 2021* (providing examples such as using internet or mobile phones as a means to (1) engage or attempt to engage in child sexual exploitation; (2) persuade, induce, entice or coerce a minor to engage in any illegal sexual activity; or (3) commit an offense involving child sexual abuse material).

Layers of the Internet Where Online Exploitation of Children Occurs

The layers of the Internet go beyond the surface content that many can easily access in their daily searches, as shown in figure 1.²⁵ Examples include websites for news, e-commerce, marketing, peer-to-peer platforms, gaming websites, and social networking. The other content is that of the Deep Web, which is not generally accessible. Examples include content on databases, private intranets (such as internal networks of corporations or universities), and sites protected by passwords or other restrictions. The furthest corners of the Deep Web, segments known as the Dark Web, contain content that has been intentionally concealed and requires specific software to access. The Dark Web may be used for legitimate purposes as well as to conceal criminal or otherwise malicious activities. Online exploitation of children can occur through any of the layers of the Internet.

²⁵The Internet is also used for email, file transfers, and instant messaging, among other things.

Figure 1: Layers of the Internet



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS), Dark Web, R44101, (Washington, D.C.: March 10, 2017). | GAO-23-105260

Examples of Factors Contributing to Growth in Online Exploitation of Children

Increased online access, new technology, and the rise of encryption are contributing to offending rates. The COVID-19 pandemic created a 'perfect storm' of conditions that fueled a rise in child sexual exploitation and abuse across the globe, according to a WeProtect Global Alliance 2021 threat assessment.²⁶ The pace of technological change continues to complicate the response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. In 1995, less than 1 percent of the world's population were active internet users, according to this threat assessment. By 2020, this figure had grown to 59.5 percent. Offenders on the dark web are becoming

²⁶WeProtect Global Alliance, *Global Threat Assessment 2021* (London, United Kingdom: 2021).

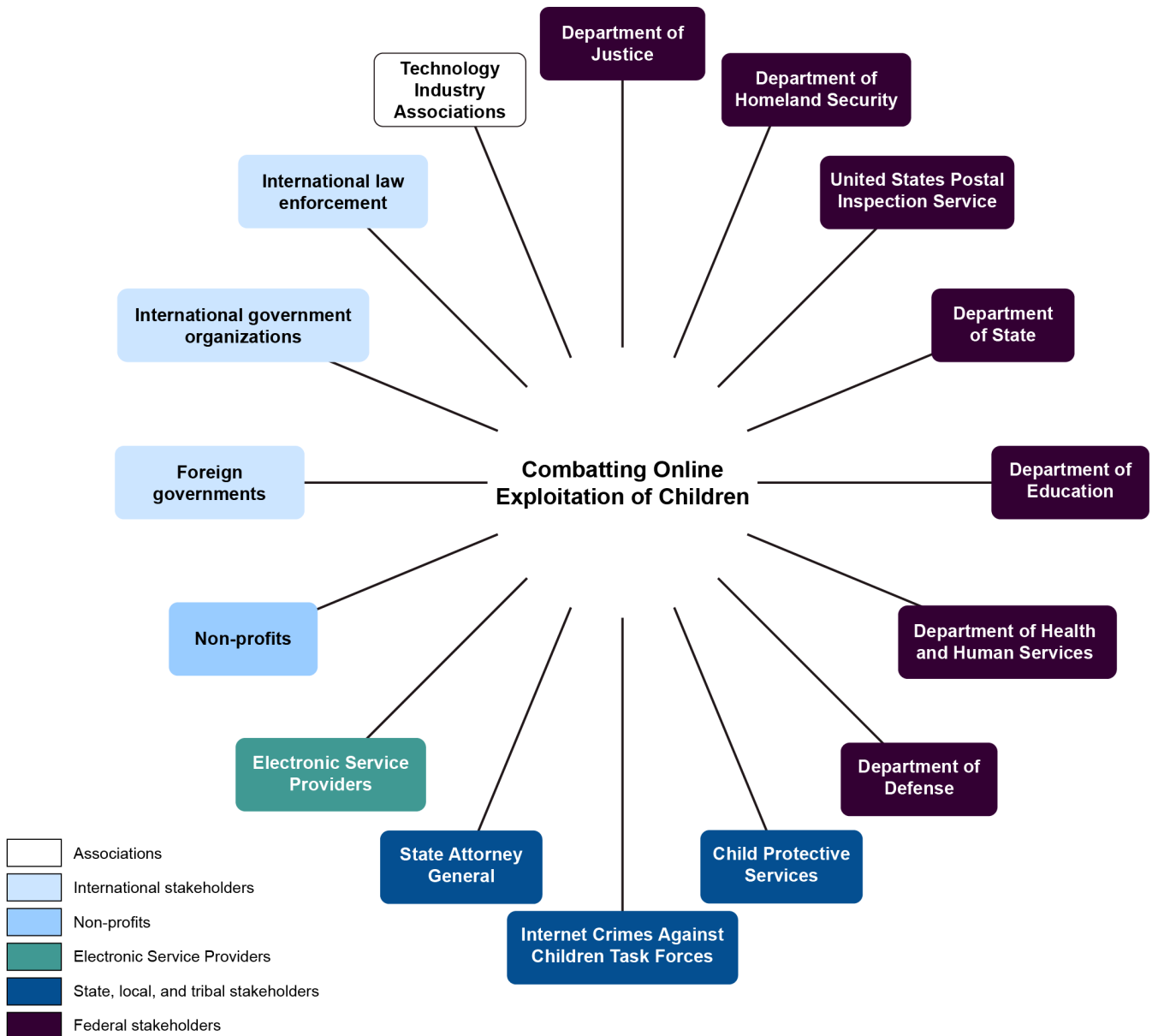
increasingly sophisticated and comfortable with the cutting-edge technology they use to create and distribute child sexual abuse material. To further complicate matters, the threat assessment notes that an emerging technology-savvy generation of dark web offenders is employing and promoting advanced security techniques and services to evade detection. Appendix I provides additional information on these factors that have contributed to the growth and concerns in online exploitation of children.

Multiple Stakeholders Share Responsibility for Combatting Online Exploitation of Children

Multiple federal, state, local, and tribal government agencies and entities have roles and responsibilities related to combating online exploitation of children. As illustrated in figure 2, these stakeholders also coordinate with non-profit organizations and private sector electronic service providers.²⁷

²⁷Electronic service providers vary by types of services provided, ranging from access points to the Internet, search engines, and classified advertisements, to social networking and cloud storage sites.

Figure 2: Examples of Stakeholders Involved in Addressing Online Exploitation of Children



Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with federal and state agencies, industry associations, non-profit, and non-government organizations. | GAO-23-105260

Specifically, twenty-four federal agency components within seven federal departments are involved in, and have specific roles and responsibilities devoted to, combating online exploitation of children. For example,

federal efforts include prevention by developing and sharing education materials about the dangers of child exploitation, and investigating and prosecuting cases of child exploitation. DOJ and DHS, among others, are responsible for efforts related to investigating and prosecuting online exploitation of children. See appendix II for more information on the federal agencies and components' roles and responsibilities.

In addition to federal efforts to address these crimes, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies generally enforce child exploitation related laws within their own jurisdictions. These agencies may also work collaboratively with federal agencies through federal task forces to combat child exploitation. To assist these law enforcement efforts, DOJ's OJJDP allocates funds to the NCMEC, which serves as a national resource center for information related to crimes against children.²⁸ In addition, among other responsibilities, OJJDP provides funding and training support for the ICAC Task Force program, a national network of 61 coordinated task forces representing more than 5,400 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies. These agencies are engaged in both proactive and reactive investigations, forensic examinations, and criminal prosecutions. Other agencies and components play important roles in this work by supporting victims, providing grants to state, local, and tribal governments and non-profit partners, and educating the public about the dangers of child exploitation.

In addition, the federal government coordinates with international and industry partners and stakeholders. For example, in March 2020, DOJ and DHS, along with government counterparts from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom published 11 voluntary principles to counter online exploitation and abuse of children. The principles were developed in consultation with representatives from six leading technology companies and a range of experts from industry, civil society,

²⁸Federal law directs OJJDP to make an annual grant to NCMEC to carry out various responsibilities related to missing and exploited children. Among these are (1) coordinating public and private programs that locate or reunite missing children; (2) providing technical assistance and training to families, law enforcement agencies, State and local governments, elements of the criminal justice system, nongovernmental agencies, local educational agencies, and the general public; and (3) providing training, technical assistance, and information to nongovernmental organizations relating to non-compliant sex offenders and to law enforcement agencies in identifying and locating such individuals. 34 U.S.C. § 11293(b). The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, a sister organization to NCMEC, is financially supported through Department of State grant monies, serving the same function, focused on issues overseas and within international schools.

and academia. Companies in the technology industry can choose to implement these principles to protect the children who use their platforms from sexual abuse online and to make their platforms more difficult for child sex offenders to exploit.²⁹

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the CyberTipline

NCMEC is a private, nonprofit organization that plays a significant role by serving as the nation's clearinghouse and resource center for child protection. NCMEC also maintains the CyberTipline to receive tips on the exploitation of children from electronic service providers and members of the general public.³⁰ NCMEC's mission is to assist in the location and recovery of missing children and to prevent the abduction, molestation, sexual exploitation, and victimization of children. NCMEC is authorized by Congress to carry out certain tasks with grant funding it receives through a cooperative agreement with OJJDP.³¹

The electronic service providers are required by law to report to NCMEC any instances when they become aware of apparent sexual exploitation of children on their networks, as well as from the general public.³² NCMEC refers CyberTipline reports of apparent sexual exploitation of children from electronic service providers and the general public to domestic and international law enforcement agencies for investigation, as shown in figure 3.³³ In 2021, according to NCMEC, the center alerted law

²⁹The voluntary principles cover the following themes: prevent child sexual abuse material; target online grooming and preparatory behavior; target livestreaming; prevent searches of child sexual abuse material from surfacing; adopt a specialized approach for children; consider victim/survivor-led mechanisms; and collaborate and respond to evolving threats. Department of Justice, *Department of Justice, Homeland Security and International Partners Announce Launch of Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, Press Release 20-274 (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2020).

³⁰The PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 requires electronic communication service providers and remote computing services to make reports to the CyberTipline. 18 U.S.C. § 2258A. Collectively termed electronic service providers for purposes of this report, these include any service that provides to users the ability to send or receive wire or electronic communications, see 18 U.S.C. § 2510(15), such as e-mail and instant messaging services and gateway access to the Internet. In addition, this includes data storage services, such as those that offer subscribers the opportunity to store materials like address books, calendars, photo albums, video content, electronic files, documents, and other types of content.

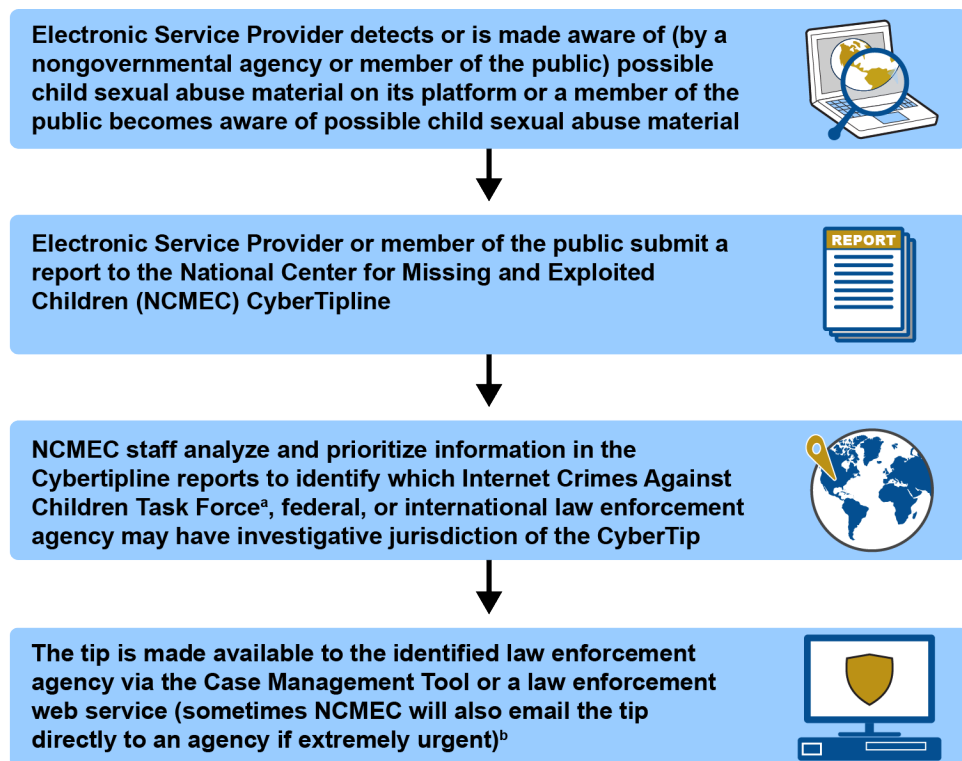
³¹See 34 U.S.C. § 11293(b)(1). According to NCMEC, for calendar year 2021, NCMEC received about 70 percent of its funding from government contracts and grants, with the remainder coming from other revenue and support.

³²See 18 U.S.C. § 2258A.

³³34 U.S.C. § 11293(b)(1)(K)(i)(II).

enforcement to over 4200 potential new child victims of child sexual abuse material based on reports received through the CyberTipline.

Figure 3: Overview of National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) Process for Receiving and Disseminating CyberTipline Reports



Source: NCMEC and GAO Analysis. | GAO-23-105260

^aThe Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force are a national network of 61 coordinated task forces representing more than 5,400 federal, state, and local law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies.

^bThe Internet Crimes Against Children Data System (IDS) used by the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces is one example of a law enforcement web service.

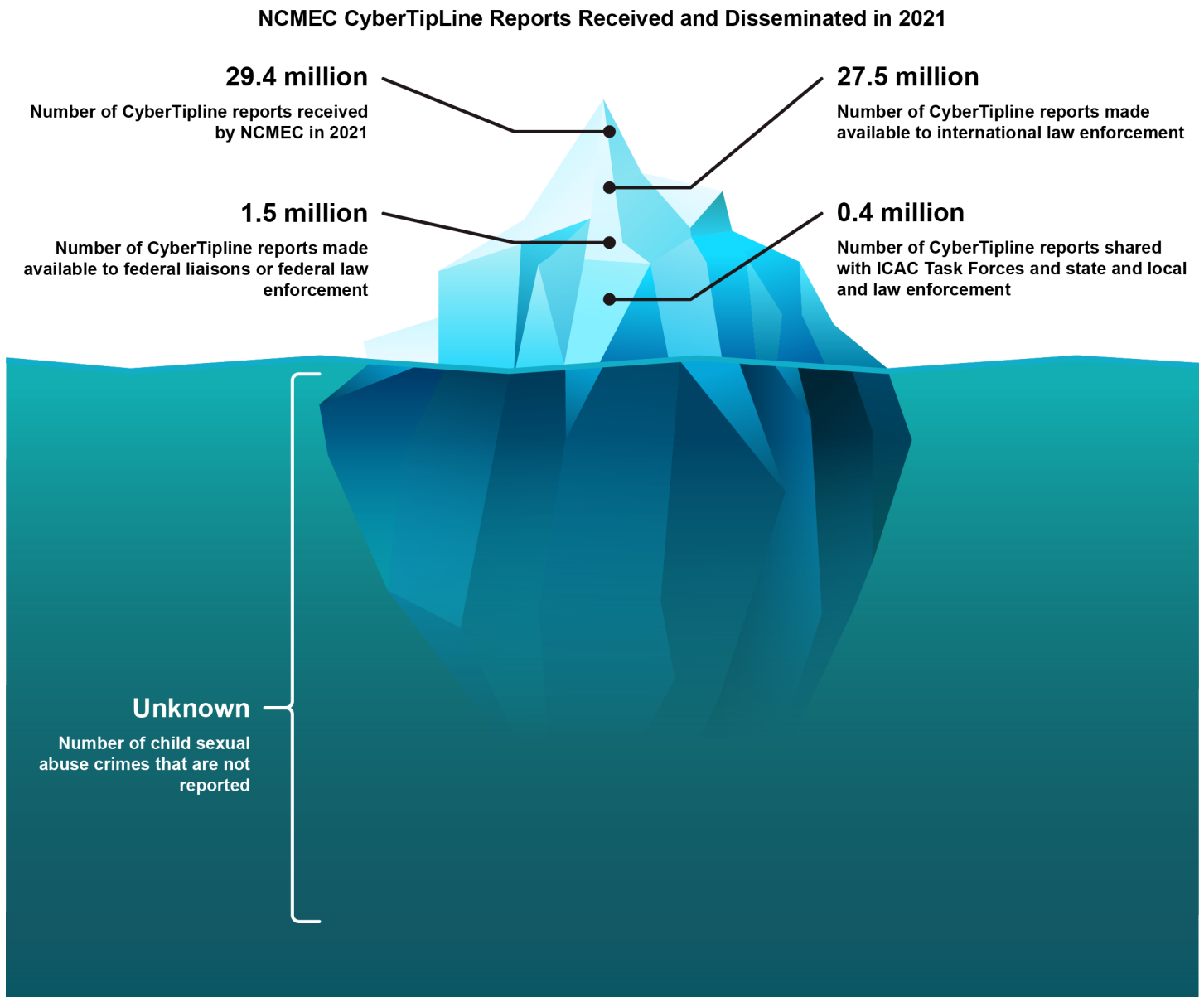
Number of Reported Instances of Suspected Exploitation of Children

NCMEC received 29.4 million CyberTipline reports of suspected exploitation of children in 2021, as shown in figure 4. These reports concern various types of exploitation of children such as child sexual abuse material (possession, manufacture, and distribution); extraterritorial child sexual exploitation and abuse, child sex trafficking, child sexual molestation, online enticement of children for sexual acts, and unsolicited obscene material sent to a child. Most CyberTipline reports involve the upload of child sexual abuse material by users outside of the U.S. This is

largely because electronic service providers are required to report to the CyberTipline if they become aware of suspected child sexual abuse material on their platforms and servers, according to NCMEC.³⁴

³⁴18 U.S.C. § 2258A.

Figure 4: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline Reports Received and Disseminated to Law Enforcement in 2021



Source: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with federal and state agencies, Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Forces, industry, associations, non-profit, and non-governmental organizations. | GAO-23-105260

In 2021, electronic service providers provided over 29.1 million of the 29.4 million total reports to the CyberTipline. A significant proportion of reports of child sexual abuse material are generated by the resharing of 'known' imagery. Repeat sharing serves to re-victimize the victims in the images. Approximately 93 percent of the cases involving online child sexual abuse material involved someone outside of the United States – either the developer of the material was outside of the US, or the buyer or distributor, according to NCMEC.³⁵ NCMEC shares its reports with federal, state, and local law enforcement, but also with 140 countries and territories around the world. In addition, law enforcement may receive leads through other methods.³⁶

Federal Agencies Have Efforts to Address Online Exploitation of Children and Stakeholders Reported Some Challenges

Various Federal Agencies Have Taken Actions to Address Online Exploitation of Children





Federal agencies are working to address online exploitation of children through a number of activities including investigative task forces, science and technology innovation, training, and public awareness campaigns.³⁷ See figure 5 for examples of ongoing federal efforts to address online exploitation of children as of August 2022.

³⁵Additional information on the CyberTipline reports broken out by electronic service provider and by country is available on NCMEC's website at <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2021-reports-by-country.pdf>.

³⁶Child sexual exploitation and abuse is an under-reported crime, according to a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment. See WeProtect Global Alliance, *Global Threat Assessment 2021*.

³⁷Although, online exploitation of children is a global issue that involves international partners, the focus of this report is on U.S. efforts and challenges to combat online exploitation of children and not international efforts.

Figure 5: Examples of Federal Efforts to Address Online Exploitation of Children

Efforts	Action	Example of effort
Investigations 	Dedicated, trained officers and prosecutors with expertise in investigating online child sexual exploitation work collaboratively to perform successful joint investigations and prosecutions.	In 2021, the Oregon Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) field office created the Southern Oregon Child Exploitation Team which consists of federal, state and local law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies in Southern Oregon. The Team is working to investigate perpetrators of online exploitation of children for instance, in April 2022, the Team arrested five perpetrators.
Science and technology innovation 	Develop innovative solutions and improve the use of technology to detect, block and prevent online sexual exploitation of children.	In 2021, Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate and the Maine HSI field office began working together to test new technology that will help investigators review warrant data collected from electronic service providers in a way that is more easily searchable for identifying information such as IP address, name, phone number, etc.
Training 	Provide education and information with the intent to expand efforts and knowledge within law enforcement, prosecutorial agencies, and other entities working to address online exploitation of children.	The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs hosts an annual National Training event that provides law enforcement investigators and prosecutors specialized training on the investigation and prosecution of technology-facilitated crimes against children. The most recent training was held in June 2022 in Atlanta, Georgia.
Public awareness campaigns 	Develop and provide education and awareness to communities, educators, parents, care-givers, and children, on online safety and the current and future threats to children online.	In 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) launched a “Stop Sextortion” campaign to educate middle and high school students on one of the risks that they can encounter online through the devices they use for gaming, homework, and communicating with friends. This effort is ongoing for example, in April 2022, the Louisiana FBI field office participated in a news segment on the topic.

Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with various federal agencies and Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces. | GAO-23-105260

Note: The above are examples and not indicative of all federal efforts to address online exploitation of children.

Federal, State, and Local Investigation Efforts

Several federal agencies have components that conduct investigations and prosecutions related to online exploitation of children. For example, within DOJ, the FBI leads 85 Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking Task Forces, which combine the FBI’s resources with other law

enforcement agencies to investigate child exploitation cases. In addition, DOJ's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section attorneys and computer forensic specialists help lead the department's efforts to enforce federal child exploitation laws and prevent the exploitation of children. This section also partners with United States Attorneys' Offices to implement the Project Safe Childhood initiative. Project Safe Childhood marshals federal, state, and local resources to locate, apprehend, and prosecute individuals who exploit children via the internet, as well as to identify and rescue victims. The United States Attorneys' Offices and federal law enforcement agencies also work together to investigate and prosecute crimes involving online exploitation of children offenses. The Executive Office for United States Attorneys' Office reported that 3,298 cases were filed in court in 2021 involving child exploitation.



Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), within DHS's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, is the department's principal investigative law enforcement agency using its broad legal authority to combat transnational crime and illicit activity, including crimes against children. HSI has various components that contribute to investigating crimes involving the exploitation of children. For instance, the Child Exploitation Investigations Unit, within HSI Cyber Crimes Center, provides assistance to HSI field offices. The Unit also coordinates major investigations, provides subject matter expertise in victim identification efforts, and conducts operations worldwide to identify and rescue child victims and identify and apprehend perpetrators.

In addition to the federal agencies pursuing crimes involving online exploitation of children, state and local law enforcement investigate a significant number of cases, which are primarily facilitated through the ICAC Task Force program. OJJDP reported that the ICAC Task Forces reviewed 1.4 million reports of online child exploitation, resulting in the arrest of more than 123,790 suspects, between 1998 and 2022. Further, OJJDP reported that the ICAC Task Force program trained more than 826,700 law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and other professionals on techniques to investigate and prosecute ICAC-related cases in the same time frame.

Both federal law enforcement and the ICAC Task Forces investigate cases of online exploitation of children through proactive investigations and reactive investigations. Proactive investigations are important for several reasons. For instance, they allow investigators to target the most egregious offenders, identify offenders abusing more than one child, identify how offenders are sharing child sexual abuse material with one

another, and how offenders interact with children among other things, according to law enforcement officials. Reactive investigations are typically initiated as a result of a CyberTip. See figure 6 for a description of proactive and reactive investigations.

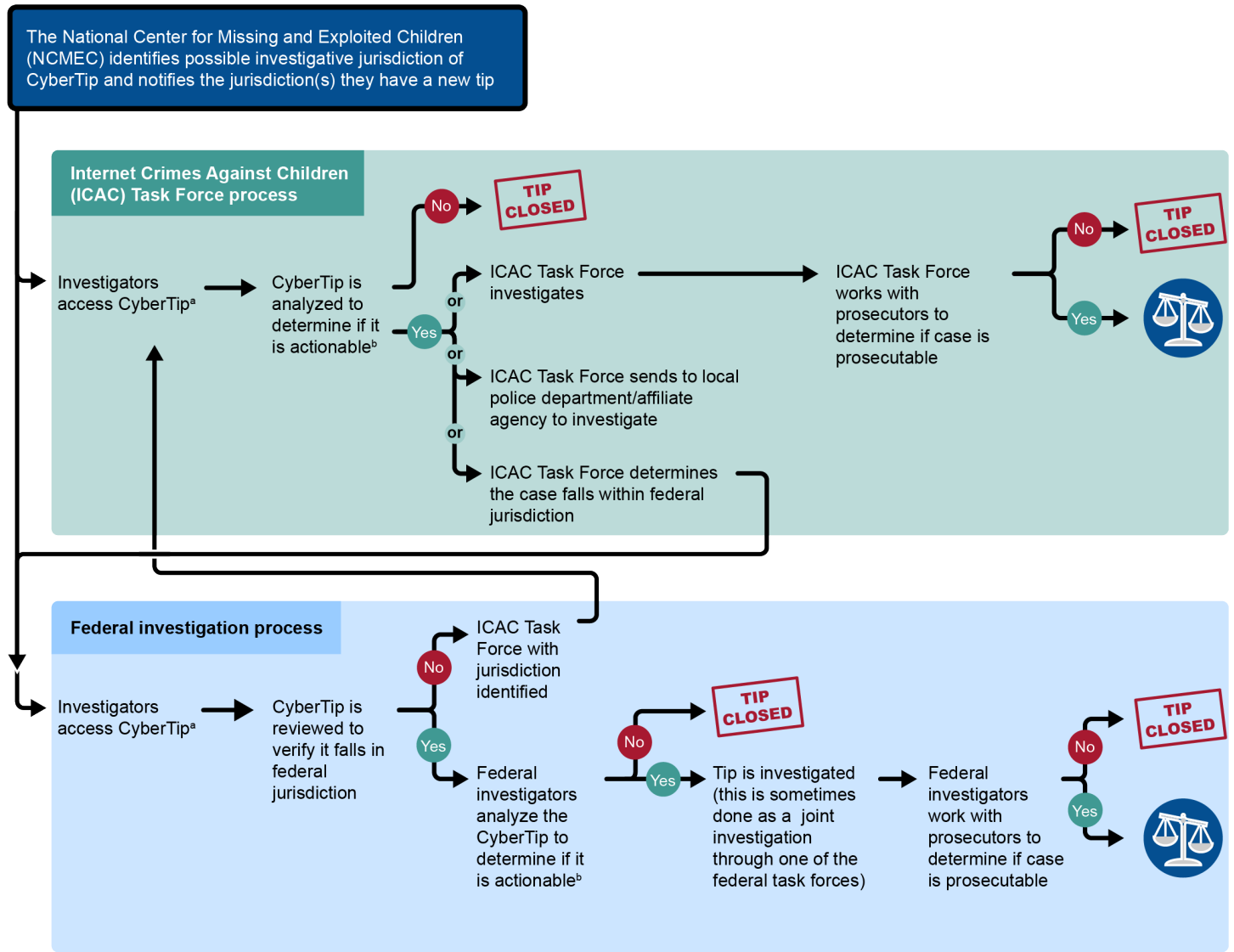
Figure 6: Proactive and Reactive Investigations



	Definition	Purpose	Where leads come from
 <p>Proactive investigations</p>	<p>Cases in which law enforcement work to identify perpetrators and rescue victims prior to or during abuse</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find perpetrators before they have the chance to exploit or abuse a child online • Identify and rescue current and possible victims 	<p>Undercover operations on platforms such as social media sites, peer-to-peer sites, and gaming platforms</p>
 <p>Reactive investigations</p>	<p>Cases in which law enforcement work to identify perpetrators and rescue victims based on a tip or lead</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify perpetrators that have already exploited or abused a child • Identify and rescue past and current victims 	<p>Tips from sources such as the CyberTipline, other law enforcement entities, social welfare organizations, the community</p>

Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with law enforcement officials from various federal agencies and Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces. | GAO-23-105260

According to officials from federal agencies and the ICAC Task Forces, tips from the CyberTipline account for the majority of reactive investigations. According to these same officials, each tip they receive is investigated which can be time consuming. Figure 7 below describes the general investigative process for a NCMEC CyberTip.

Figure 7: Reactive Investigation Process of a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTip



 CyberTip is closed out
 Continues to prosecution

Source: GAO analysis of documentation and interviews with various federal agencies, ICAC Task Forces and NCMEC. | GAO-23-105260

Note: The above graphic does not account for all aspects of the investigative process. For instance, NCMEC may send a CyberTip to multiple jurisdictions at the same time. In addition, law enforcement agencies often collaborate with one another to investigate a tip which is not shown.

^aLaw enforcement entities access CyberTips through a number of methods. For instance, the Case Management Tool is NCMEC's data management interface used by certain law enforcement

agencies to download CyberTipline reports made available to them. NCMEC also provides CyberTipline data via other case management products referred to as a law enforcement web service. The Internet Crimes Against Children Data System used by the majority of the 61 ICAC Task Forces is one example of a different case management system that has access to CyberTipline reports through NCMEC's law enforcement web service.

^bFor a CyberTip to be actionable it must meet certain federal statutory requirements to be considered child sexual abuse material and a punishable offense. See 18 U.S.C. § 2256(8). Each state also has statutory requirements outlining what constitutes child sexual abuse material.

Reactive investigations stemming from a CyberTip or another source are not necessarily investigated by a single law enforcement agency. Often investigations prompted by a CyberTip or another source are investigated collaboratively across several jurisdictions, according to federal law enforcement and ICAC Task Force officials we interviewed. For example, the ICAC Task Forces will often work with other affiliate agencies in their respective states to investigate a tip. In addition, the ICAC Task Forces also coordinate and collaborate with federal law enforcement agencies such as the FBI and HSI when conducting investigations stemming from a CyberTip. Law enforcement investigators also collaborate and coordinate with federal, state, and local prosecutors to ensure a case has sufficient evidence to be prosecutable in a court of law.

Federal agencies and federally funded task forces use a number of mechanisms to conduct undercover investigations, deconflict tips and investigations, and track the status of cases. Federal law enforcement and ICAC Task Force officials told us they use several automated investigative systems to covertly identify and monitor computer networks to determine if suspects are downloading and sharing child sexual abuse material. For example, federal, state, and local agencies use the Child Protection System to monitor aspects of the dark web including peer-to-peer networks to determine where perpetrators are downloading and sharing child sexual abuse material with one another.³⁸ In addition, DOJ officials told us that federal agencies and the ICAC Task Forces use the

³⁸The Child Rescue Coalition, a non-profit organization that rescues children from sexual abuse by building technology for law enforcement, free of charge, to track, arrest, and prosecute child predators developed the Child Protection System. For more information see <https://childrescuecoalition.org/>.

ICAC Child Online Protection System to identify, in real time, individuals that are sharing child sexual abuse material.³⁹

The ICAC Data System is another automated system used by federal, state, and local law enforcement offices.⁴⁰ The West Virginia State Police developed, implemented, and maintains the information system. ICAC Task Forces and other registered law enforcement users such as the Army Criminal Investigation Division utilize the ICAC Data System, which allows users to contribute and access data (e.g. name, alias, email address, IP address of perpetrator and related information) to resolve case conflicts. This system alerts the registered user if information has been collected on a potential perpetrator in other systems that store information on crimes against children. The system also informs the user of other law enforcement agencies working on a case involving the perpetrator. According to OJJDP, there are over 19,200 registered users as of September 2022. The majority of the ICAC Data System users are state and local investigators affiliated with one of the 61 ICAC Task Forces.

Federal law enforcement officials we met with noted that agencies also use different specific case management systems to keep track of cases within their own agencies. For instance, FBI and HSI use internal case management systems to track the progress of a case from beginning to end.

Science and Technology Innovation Efforts

Federal agencies are working to improve and develop new technology tools to help prevent, identify, and deter online exploitation of children. For example, FBI officials stated that the Child Exploitation Operational

³⁹The ICAC Child On-line Protection System is supported by the National Criminal Justice Training of Fox Valley Technical College and is at the center of most peer-to-peer investigations being worked by the ICAC Task Forces. In addition, ICAC Child On-line Protection System supports investigations of Internet chat rooms, online solicitations, enticements and dark web activity. The ICAC Child On-line Protection System provides critical investigative resources to the ICAC Task Force through the numerous investigative tools it hosts and data it provides to ICAC Task Force investigators.

⁴⁰The PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 required the Attorney General to develop a National Internet Crimes Against Children Data System, an online data system to include information-sharing capacity, case deconfliction, and other capabilities. 34 U.S.C. § 21115. In 2010, OJJDP awarded a grant to the Massachusetts State Police to conduct a national needs assessment for the National Internet Crimes Against Children Data System, however the work was suspended due to alleged misconduct. In September 2011, DOJ awarded funds to the West Virginia State Police to implement the ICAC Data System. Congressional Research Service, *The Missing and Exploited Children (MEC) Program: Background and Policies* (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2019).

Unit identifies new applications, tools, and software that may be useful to agents in the field investigating crimes against children. In addition, as of December 2021, DHS officials told us they are working to develop new technology to aid investigators in catching perpetrators using livestreaming technology to facilitate or view child sexual abuse material. For example, in 2019, the DHS Science and Technology Directorate began developing a tool to identify connections between various perpetrators, including the abusers who commit physical acts, groomers who manipulate victims online to produce material, and distributors of child sexual abuse material among other individuals. The DHS Science and Technology Directorate also partnered with the Department of Defense, FBI, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in 2019 to expand upon a program that uses facial recognition algorithms and machine learning to find and group images together which HSI reported has reduced investigation timeframes according to a 2022 press release.⁴¹

Training

Federal, state, and local agencies involved in addressing online exploitation of children provide and participate in a wide range of training and educational programs, according to officials.

Training includes topics such as investigative and prosecutorial techniques, identification of trends in online technology, digital forensic analysis, prevention of online exploitation of children, and assistance to victims. For instance, United States Attorneys' Office personnel can participate in a number of courses at the National Advocacy Center covering topics related to online exploitation of children.⁴² In addition, DOJ coordinates an annual National Law Enforcement Training on Child Exploitation. This training is designed to expand the efforts and knowledge base of federal, state, local, and tribal investigators and prosecutors by providing specialized training focused on investigating and prosecuting technology-facilitated crimes against children. DOJ hosted the most recent event in June 2022. This training included lecture sessions, demonstrations, and hands-on technology labs on relevant

⁴¹Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, *Feature Article: S&T Tech Leads to Children Rescued and Traffickers Arrested*, (Washington, D.C: May 9, 2022).

⁴²The National Advocacy Center is a nationwide training center operated by DOJ through the Executive Office for United States Attorneys' Office of Legal Education.

topics such as online undercover chat investigations, CyberTip investigation best practices, and collecting digital evidence.

Agencies and non-governmental organizations also provide child-serving professionals such as teachers, counselors, and victim service advocates training on topics related to addressing online exploitation of children. For instance, OJJDP funds trainings on topics that reflect the current trends and technology changes that law enforcement may encounter when investigating cases related to online exploitation of children, according to DOJ officials. According to a 2019 Congressional Research Services report, NCMEC also provides in-person and online training on many topics related to addressing online exploitation of children, such as how to teach online safety in the classroom and working with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse material.⁴³

Public Awareness Efforts

Federal agencies also have efforts to increase public awareness of the current and future threats to children with the ultimate goal of preventing online exploitation of children from occurring in the first place. For instance, the U.S. Secret Service partnered with NCMEC to provide community education programs for parents and children on internet safety in an age-appropriate manner through its Childhood Smart Program according to its website.⁴⁴ DOJ also works to increase public awareness through its various components. For example, United States Attorneys' Offices conduct public awareness campaigns through the Project Safe Childhood Initiative. The U.S. Department of State also works to increase awareness by highlighting countries that are experiencing high levels of child sexual exploitation in its annual Trafficking in Persons Report.⁴⁵

Stakeholders Described Potential Investigative Challenges

Investigating online exploitation of children has become more difficult due to a number of challenges noted by stakeholders. These challenges include the pace of technology, difficulties maintaining a skilled workforce, recent judicial decisions impacting investigations, an increasing number

⁴³Congressional Research Service, *The Missing and Exploited Children's (MEC) Program: Background and Policies*, (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2019).

⁴⁴The Childhood Smart Program began in 2016 and aims to educate parents and children (ages 5-17) about real-world safety issues and increase awareness of internet safety. Presentations are provided by United States Secret Service Ambassadors. See, United States Secret Service, "*The Secret Service and NCMEC: Partnering to Keep Children Safe*", accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.secretservice.gov/NCMECpartnership>.

⁴⁵See, State Department, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *2021 Trafficking in Persons Report*, (Washington, D.C.: June 2021).

of tips, and the COVID-19 pandemic according to officials from federal law enforcement, ICAC Task Forces, and non-profits we interviewed.

- **Pace of technological advancements.** Technological developments have significantly changed child sexual exploitation offenses over the last decade. For instance, the average storage size has increased significantly on many devices and the prevalence of cloud storage allows perpetrators to scatter data across the world, according to DOJ. In addition, 7 billion people around the world now have access to cell phones, which can be used to record and store child sexual abuse material. Further, as discussed above, the Dark Web allows perpetrators to hide child sexual abuse material from law enforcement. DOJ officials told us that these challenges have led to increased investigation timeframes and challenges with victim identification.

In addition, new technologies that allow for livestreaming and sharing of child sexual abuse material are posing challenges for law enforcement according to federal and ICAC Task Force officials. Producing and sharing child sexual abuse material via apps that support livestreaming and end-to-end encryption is difficult to proactively prevent and even more difficult for law enforcement to catch offenders. According to federal law enforcement, ICAC Task Forces and non-profit officials we interviewed, this is because there is rarely any evidence that the livestreaming event or image sharing occurred. To address this, some law enforcement agencies are taking steps to develop technology that helps undercover investigators identify the language being spoken in videos and chats. For example, the DHS Science and Technology Directorate developed SpeechView, which uses machine learning to analyze and translate audio content in videos. SpeechView greatly increases the productivity of investigators by translating and transcribing audio content into a searchable format so it can be reviewed and analyzed quickly.

- **Maintaining a skilled workforce.** Recruiting and retaining staff to work in the area of online exploitation of children can be difficult, according to federal law enforcement and ICAC Task Force officials. Reasons for this include the amount of training necessary to work cases involving child sexual abuse material, mental health challenges associated with viewing child sexual abuse material and interacting with victims, caseloads, and competing investigation priorities. In addition, a 2022 National Institute of Justice report stated that many forensic examiners leave after about four years (anecdotally), for better pay and to escape the mental health concerns related to child

exploitation investigations.⁴⁶ Agencies are taking steps to address some of these challenges. For instance, OJJDP funds a dedicated training and technical assistance Officer Wellness Program that provides support to law enforcement and prosecutors on recognizing signs of trauma due to the long term and repeated exposure to child sexual abuse material. In addition, agencies are focused on providing training on topics such as investigation best practices, new technologies, and computer forensics among other things as discussed above.

- **Judicial decisions.** Federal law enforcement and ICAC Task Force officials noted that several recent judicial decisions also impacted how they conduct their investigations. For example, officials we met with from the Oregon FBI and HSI Field Offices, and Oregon ICAC Task Force explained to us how a Ninth Circuit decision has shaped their investigations. Specifically, since that decision, law enforcement in the Ninth Circuit must obtain a warrant before opening a suspect's email attachments.⁴⁷ Officials from the Oregon ICAC Task Force said that in some instances, they spent hours investigating a tip but were subsequently unable to prosecute because the investigation was conducted in a manner that was inconsistent with the court's decision.

Federal law enforcement officials and ICAC Task Force officials we met with also told us that they occasionally had issues gathering evidence from electronic service providers because federal law requires providers to keep known child sexual abuse material on their servers for only 90 days.⁴⁸ They told us they are developing new investigative techniques to help address these challenges. For instance, Oregon HSI field office officials told us they are developing

⁴⁶B.N. Levine, *Increasing the Efficacy of Investigations of Online Child Sexual Exploitation*, a special report prepared at the request of the National Institute of Justice, May 2022.

⁴⁷The Ninth Circuit determined that law enforcement violated an individual's Fourth Amendment right "to be free from unreasonable searches" when it, without a warrant, opened and viewed images from a third party's automated system – even though those images had already been identified by the third party's automated system as potentially illegal. See *United States v. Wilson*, 13 F.4th 961, 973-74, 980 (9th Cir. 2021). Other courts have reached a different conclusion in cases with circumstances similar to *Wilson*—such a search did not violate an individual's Fourth Amendment right. See, e.g., *United States v. Reddick*, 900 F.3d 636, 639-40 (5th Cir. 2018), *cert. denied*, 139 S. Ct. 1617 (2019); *United States v. Miller*, 982 F.3d 412, 430-31 (6th Cir. 2020), *cert. denied*, 141 S. Ct. 2797 (2021); *United States v. Montijo*, No. 2:21-cr-75-SPC-NPM, 2022 WL 93535, at *5-6 (M.D. Fla. Jan. 10, 2022).

⁴⁸18 U.S.C. § 2258A(h)(1).

Proactive Investigations Impacted by Increased CyberTips

The Southern Florida ICAC Task Force reported in the July – December 2021 Semi-Annual report that as a result of the overwhelming increases in CyberTips and reactive investigations, proactive investigations and operations decreased. In addition, ICAC investigators are being tasked with an increased CyberTip caseload and unfortunately do not have the time to engage in proactive ICAC investigations.

Source: Southern Florida ICAC Task Force July – December 2021 Semi-Annual Report. | GAO-23-105260

consistent language for the Oregon ICAC Task Force members, local, and state law enforcement officials to use when submitting a warrant. The consistent language will help ensure they are obtaining the evidence they need within the constraints of the law.

Further, the Oklahoma ICAC Task Force reported in its July – December 2021 Semi-Annual Report to OJJDP that the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* decision required them to change how they conduct online exploitation of children investigations.⁴⁹ The decision limited the state’s jurisdiction, which subsequently caused the number of federal cases to increase. To ensure they were continuing to address online exploitation of children, the report stated that six of the agents assigned to the Oklahoma ICAC Task Force were also assigned to federal task forces with FBI and HSI. According to the report, this was necessary for two reasons. First, assigning agents to both the Oklahoma ICAC Task Force and federal task forces is necessary for agents to effectively investigate and prosecute cases in Oklahoma given the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* decision. The Oklahoma ICAC Task Force reported that the decision ultimately led to an increase in federal cases in Oklahoma due to requests from local Oklahoma jurisdictions. Second, federal agents are able to more effectively enforce child exploitation laws within the State of Oklahoma than the ICAC Task Force alone.

- **Increasing number of tips.** The increasing number of tips reported to NCMEC’s CyberTipline system has made it challenging for law enforcement and prosecutors to efficiently investigate cases. Officials from FBI and HSI told us that while the number of tips has increased, the number of their staff dedicated to investigating the tips has not. Increased tips and such resource challenges have resulted in a reduction of proactive investigations and increased investigation time frames. However, federal law enforcement officials and ICAC Task Force officials also told us that many of the tips they receive are not

⁴⁹In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that the Muscogee (Creek) Nation’s reservation had not been disestablished by Congress and, therefore, the state did not have jurisdiction over crimes committed by Indians on the reservation. *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S. Ct. 2452 (2020). As a result, only the federal and tribal governments had jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed by Indians in a large portion of northeastern Oklahoma, including most of the city of Tulsa. However, in June 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government and state government have concurrent jurisdiction to prosecute crimes committed by non-Indians against Indians in Indian country, which includes Indian reservations. *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*, 142 S. Ct. 2486 (2022). Under *Castro-Huerta*, states have concurrent criminal jurisdiction in Indian country unless it is preempted by federal law or principles of tribal self-government. The report to OJJDP, and our analysis thereof, pre-dated the *Castro-Huerta* decision, so the report only notes the effects of the *McGirt* decision.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on ICAC Task Forces

Forty-nine of the 61 ICAC Task Forces mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic in their July – December 2021 Semi-Annual Report. Forty-five ICAC Task Forces provided information on how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their operations July – December 2021. For example, the Task forces reported that COVID-19 pandemic impacted their investigations, training, and public outreach, among other activities. For instance, 29 ICAC Task Forces included information in their Semi-Annual Reports on the pandemic's impact in limiting in-person training opportunities for investigators.

Source: ICAC Task Force July – December 2021 Semi-Annual Reports. | GAO-23-105260

actionable. This may be because there is not enough information to investigate or the photo or image submitted to NCMEC does not contain child sexual abuse material. In addition, according to DOJ, NCMEC has taken steps to conduct increased triage and file reviews of CyberTips prior to forwarding those tips to law enforcement for further review and investigation. This allows NCMEC to decrease the number of tips it sends to law enforcement that contain information that has already been deemed non-actionable, according to DOJ officials.

- **COVID-19 pandemic.** According to officials from federal agencies, the ICAC Task Forces, and nonprofit organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the above challenges. For example, officials told us that the pandemic impacted the availability of in-person training for law enforcement officials, as well as community outreach initiatives, and investigative bandwidth within several agencies.

Further, the WeProtect Global Alliance reported in 2021 that the COVID-19 pandemic led to children spending more time online, and reduced opportunities for perpetrators to commit in-person abuse, which fueled online offending and demand for child sexual abuse material.⁵⁰

While these challenges exist, federal agencies are taking steps to address some of the challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, FBI officials told us that they are working to develop ways to ensure that they are still reaching students and parents despite pandemic-related restrictions to ensure community outreach programs continue to occur, such as their Safe Online Surfing Program.⁵¹

⁵⁰The WeProtect Global Alliance also reported that a significant portion of child sexual abuse material produced is perpetrated by family members. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns created or exacerbated vulnerabilities (such as loneliness or mental health needs); increased the time children spent online (and therefore accessible to predators); and prevented access to support networks (such as trusted adults, friends) that might normally afford protection. See WeProtect Global Alliance, *Global Threat Assessment 2021*.

⁵¹The FBI Safe Online Surfing Program is a free, educational program for children that teaches cyber safety and helps them become better digital citizens in a fun and engaging way. The FBI developed the program for students in the third through eighth grades.

DOJ's National Strategy Has Not Been Updated and Does Not Meet All Statutory Requirements

DOJ's National Strategy Has Not Been Updated to Address New Challenges

The PROTECT Act required DOJ to develop a National Strategy as part of a response and strategic commitment to address child exploitation. But despite the unprecedented rise in the scope and scale of child exploitation, and the significant challenges that contribute to the federal government's ability to address the threat (both described in the previous section), DOJ has not updated its National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, as required by law. Specifically, the Attorney General was required to promulgate DOJ's National Strategy one year after the Act became law in 2008 and reissue an updated strategy to Congress by February 1 every two years thereafter.⁵² However, as shown in figure 8, DOJ has only issued the strategy twice in the last 13 years—in 2010, and most recently in 2016.

Figure 8: DOJ's Issuance of the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction from 2009 through 2021

Required year of issuance	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
Strategy issued?	Yes August 2010	No	No	Yes April 2016	No	No	No

Issued but past deadline
 Not issued

Source: Department of Justice and GAO Analysis. | GAO-23-105260

In August 2021, DOJ officials told us they planned to update the National Strategy in October 2021; in October 2021, officials revised that estimate to February 2022. As of December 2022, DOJ has not issued an updated National Strategy. DOJ officials attributed these ongoing delays in

⁵²34 U.S.C. § 21111(c).

releasing an updated National Strategy to a variety of factors. These include (1) the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) competing DOJ priorities, and (3) staffing and resource constraints.

- *COVID-19 pandemic.* DOJ officials told us that they had planned to issue the National Strategy in 2020, but postponed the issuance because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *Competing DOJ priorities.* DOJ officials told us that the department did not issue a National Strategy in 2012 and 2014 because of mission-related issues, such as the response to the ongoing surge in apprehensions of children and adults with children at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014.
- *Staffing and resource constraints.* DOJ officials noted that updating the National Strategy required a significant investment of time and staff, and the Department did not have sufficient funding, policy staff, or full-time employees dedicated to updating the strategy. Because of the costs, updating the strategy did not compete as well against other established priorities, such as investigating and prosecuting child exploitation cases. Officials stated that a paralegal, a contractor, and several attorneys are currently assigned to the update of the strategy.

DOJ officials stated that because of these concerns, they have notified the Congress of the need for additional time to fulfill the statutory requirements including updating the strategy. Officials told us that they notified Congress that, rather than reporting every second year, their staffing levels provided them with the capacity to update the National Strategy every four years. However, the department could not provide us documentation related to its communications with Congress concerning the request for an altered time line.⁵³

Although DOJ has not updated the strategy as required, DOJ officials told us these delays have not limited the impact on its on-the-ground efforts to combat child exploitation. Further, they stated that the delays in updating the strategy have not negatively impacted the Department's investigations and prosecutions, and that the number of federal child sexual abuse material production cases have nearly tripled over the past decade.

⁵³Officials told us that while DOJ has communicated with Congress about the National Strategy and have on occasion answered questions for the record related to this and other concerns regarding the National Strategy, they did not have an exhaustive list of interactions or know whether they were specific to the statutory requirements.

However, given DOJ has not updated its National Strategy consistent with the Act's timeframes, the content of the existing 2016 strategy does not comply with the law and does not align with new and evolving challenges.

⁵⁴ These include but are not limited to:

- **Perpetrators have more access to children online.** DOJ officials told us that, in recent years, COVID-19 and the resulting transition to online learning for children has provided perpetrators with more access to children, potentially contributing to significant increases in child exploitation.
- **Encryption.** For example, according to officials from the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, since the issuance of the 2016 strategy, electronic service providers have increased the use of end-to-end encryption, which undermines efforts to combat online exploitation of children, according to DOJ and DHS officials.
- **Deep and Dark Web Use.** Between 2019 and 2020 the use of 'hidden services' to distribute child sexual abuse material increased by 155%.⁵⁵

Officials from the United States Postal Inspection Service stated that given changes to the technological landscape, it would be useful if DOJ were to update its National Strategy to include a current independent threat assessment. Further, NCMEC officials told us that the strategy's threat assessment from 2016 was accurate and useful at the time of completion. However, according to DOJ and reported by the WeProtect Global Alliance, since that time, the internet has increased the opportunities for and the pervasiveness of child exploitation.⁵⁶ For example, as noted earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more children being online, the technical savvy of those who exploit children has increased, and the availability of technology in consumer products that can mask child sexual abuse material content and criminal activity has expanded. By updating its National Strategy consistent with the Act's requirements DOJ could help ensure its efforts are relevant and closely

⁵⁴We previously found that an agency's ability to assess the current internal and external environment and account for that environment, including technological advances has a critical impact on the success of strategic planning and the execution of those plans.. See *Agencies' Strategic Plans Under GPRA: Key Questions to Facilitate Congressional Review*, [GAO/GGD-10.1.16](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 1997).

⁵⁵WeProtect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2021.

⁵⁶WeProtect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2021.

align with new challenges. For example, an updated strategy could help DOJ prioritize its efforts to address pressing issues such as the increased use of end-to-end encryption—a challenge consistently noted by federal officials we met with during the course of our review.

DOJ Lacks Leadership Continuity in the National Coordinator Role

The PROTECT Act called for the designation of a senior official at DOJ responsible for the National Strategy—the National Coordinator—to act as a liaison with other federal entities in developing the strategy.⁵⁷ In addition, the Child Protection Act of 2012 required the National Coordinator to be a senior official with experience in investigating or prosecuting child exploitation cases.⁵⁸ However, from January 2010 through August 2022, nine National Coordinators have acted in the role as detailees, resulting in a lack of continuity in leadership, according to DOJ officials (see table 1).

Table 1: Number of National Coordinators Since 2010 and Dates of Service

National Coordinator	Dates in role	Months elapsed
National Coordinator 1	January 2010 – February 2012	23 months
National Coordinator 2	February 2012 – September 2012	7 months
National Coordinator 3	September 2012 – October 2012	2 months
Vacant	November 2012	1 month
National Coordinator 4	December 2012 – November 2014	23 months
Vacant	December 2014 – March 2015	4 months
National Coordinator 5	April 2015 – November 2016	19 months
National Coordinator 6	November 2016 – July 2017	9 months
National Coordinator 7	August 2017 – August 2018	13 months
National Coordinator 8	September 2018 – November 2021	38 months
National Coordinator 9 (interim) ^a	December 2021 – Current	10 months (as of October 2022)

Source: Department of Justice. | GAO-23-105260

^aThe interim National Coordinator also served as the National Coordinator December 2012 – November 2014.

One National Coordinator told us that, because they lacked sufficient resources to employ full time staff, the National Coordinator position has been filled by detailees who are also responsible for managing other DOJ-related priorities such as human trafficking and civil rights. This impeded the detailees’ ability to prioritize updating the National Strategy.

⁵⁷34 U.S.C. § 21111(d).

⁵⁸Pub. L. No. 112-206, § 6, 126 Stat. 1490, 1493 (codified at 34 U.S.C. § 21111(d)).

In addition to a lack of leadership continuity, the role has also lacked written guidance, policies and procedures, and standardized processes to ensure that the National Strategy is consistently updated efficiently. As a result, each incoming National Coordinator has initiated a new approach to update the strategy, which involves identifying staff, subject matter experts and other internal resources before the National Strategy can be revised.

We also have previously reported that the single most important element of successful government improvement initiatives—such as strategic efforts to address major challenges like ensuring the safety of our children against exploitation—is the demonstrated commitment of top leaders.⁵⁹ Federal standards for internal control in the federal government also emphasize the importance of maintaining leadership commitment in order to achieve agency objectives.⁶⁰ With a full-time National Coordinator, DOJ could better ensure continuity and help to create clear expectations and a sustainable, institutional approach to this position.

DOJ's 2016 National Strategy Does Not Include 19 Required Statutory Elements

DOJ's 2016 National Strategy includes some but not all of the elements required under the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008. The Act required, among other things, that the Attorney General create and implement a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, and include 19 statutory elements for the National Strategy (see appendix III).⁶¹

According to DOJ officials, the 2016 National Strategy provides a high-level overview of federal agencies' efforts to address child exploitation. However, the strategy is inconsistent with the Act because it does not include all of the Act's 19 required elements. As shown in figure 9, our analysis indicates that, of the 19 elements set forth which must be included in the national strategy, DOJ's National Strategy fully includes seven elements, partially includes seven elements, and does not include five elements.

⁵⁹GAO, *Government Performance: GPRA Modernization Act Provides Opportunities to Help Address Fiscal, Performance, and Management Challenges*, [GAO-11-466T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 16, 2011).

⁶⁰GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sep. 10, 2014).

⁶¹34 U.S.C. § 21111(c).

Figure 9: GAO Assessment of the 2016 National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction’s Compliance with the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008

Statutory element	Description	GAO Assessment
1. Goals	Long-range goals for reducing child exploitation	
2. Objectives and Targets	Annual measurable objectives and specific targets to accomplish quantifiable goals	
3. Budget and Federal Efforts	Annual budget priorities and Federal efforts dedicated to combating child exploitation	
4. 5-year projection	A 5-year projection for program and budget goals and priorities	
5. Policy review	A review of the policies and work of the Department of Justice related to the prevention and investigation of child exploitation crimes	
6. Non-Federal coordination	A description of the Department of Justice’s efforts to coordinate with international, State, local, and tribal law enforcement and private sector entities on child exploitation prevention and interdiction efforts	
7. Interagency coordination	Plans for interagency coordination regarding the prevention, investigation, and apprehension of individuals exploiting children	
8. Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Review	A review of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program	
9. Assessment of Technical Assistance	An assessment of the technical assistance and support available for law enforcement agencies in the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of child exploitation crimes	
10. Review of forensic analysis backlog	A review of the backlog of forensic analysis for child exploitation cases at each FBI Regional Forensic lab and an estimate of the backlog at State and local labs	
11. Plans to address forensic analysis backlog	Plans for reducing the forensic backlog, if any, at Federal, State and local labs	
12. Review of federal programs and private sector efforts	A review of Federal programs related to child exploitation prevention and education, including those related to Internet safety, and successful efforts by private sector entities to promote child and internet safety	
13. Assessment of future trends	Assessment of future trends, challenges and opportunities	
14. Plans for liaisons	Plans for liaisons with Federal and State judicial branches on matters relating to child exploitation	
15. Assessment of investigations and prosecutions	An assessment of Federal investigative and prosecution activity relating to reported incidents of child exploitation crimes	
16. Review of statistical data	A review of all available statistical data indicating the overall magnitude of child pornography trafficking in the US	
17. Recent research	Copies of recent relevant research and studies related to child exploitation	
18. Review of coordination efforts	A review of the extent of cooperation, coordination, and mutual support between private sector entities and Federal agencies, including the involvement of States, local and tribal government agencies where Federal programs are involved	
19. Conference results	The results of the Project Safe Childhood Conference or other conferences convened by the Department of Justice related to combating child exploitation	

Elements included in national strategy = 7 = 7 = 5

GAO assessment

Fully included Partially included Not included

Source: GAO Analysis of DOJ National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction. | GAO-23-105260

Note: We assessed whether or not DOJ’s 2016 National Strategy included all 19 elements required by the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008. We did not assess the extent of DOJ’s ongoing

implementation of the strategy nor how the department has incorporated the strategy into its ongoing operations.

Statutorily required elements fully included in the National Strategy.

We found that DOJ's 2016 National Strategy fully addresses seven of the nineteen statutorily required elements. For example, the strategy includes long-range goals for addressing child-exploitation.⁶² Further, it organizes those goals under four areas: investigations and prosecutions; outreach and awareness; victim services; and policy and legislative initiatives. According to the strategy, DOJ's investigative and prosecutorial goals prioritize the identification and rescuing of victims of child exploitation and target emerging technologies, offender organizations, and high-value offenders. The strategy also includes elements related to cooperation, coordination, and support among federal and non-federal stakeholders.⁶³ For example, the National Strategy outlines how the FBI's Child Exploitation Task Forces collaborate with nearly 400 state, local, tribal, and federal law enforcement partners to identify and prosecute those who exploit children, among other things.

Statutorily required elements partially included in the National Strategy.

We found that DOJ's 2016 National Strategy partially addresses seven of the nineteen statutory elements. For example, the Act required the strategy to outline annual budget priorities and federal efforts dedicated to combating child exploitation.⁶⁴ While the National Strategy included annual funding information regarding the ICAC task forces for the time period covered, it did not include similar information for other key federal efforts to combat the exploitation of children. For example, it does not address funding information for efforts such as Project Safe Childhood and NCMEC. In addition, the Act required the National Strategy to review child exploitation-related policies and work of specific DOJ components.⁶⁵ While the National Strategy addresses some of the statutorily specified components, it does not reference three of the statutorily specified components—the Offices of the Attorney General, Deputy Attorney General, and Legal Policy.

⁶²34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(1).

⁶³34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(6), (7), and (18).

⁶⁴34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(3).

⁶⁵34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(5).

Statutorily required elements not included in the National Strategy.

We found that DOJ's 2016 National Strategy did not include five of the nineteen statutory elements. For example, it does not include the requirement for a 5-year projection for program and budget goals and priorities.⁶⁶ The Act also requires that the National Strategy include annual, measurable objectives and specific targets to accomplish long-term, quantifiable goals.⁶⁷ Although the National Strategy outlines several long-term goals, it does not set annual objectives or specific targets for these goals or indicate how they could be quantified or measured. For example, the Department's long-term goal of rescuing children from exploitation lacks information on how DOJ and its federal partners would measure the achievement of this goal and an associated timeline.

According to DOJ officials, at the time of our review, the Department did not establish measurable objectives and specific targets to accomplish long-term, quantifiable goals because many of the major activities to combat child exploitation, such as rescuing a child before exploitation occurs, are difficult to track and do not always lead to an arrest. DOJ officials stated that using output data from key investigative activities—such as the number of cases, the number of arrests, and the number of search warrants—to demonstrate progress in addressing child exploitation may be misleading because the number of children being exploited can increase significantly in a short period of time.

Similarly, officials from Office of DOJ Programs—the Department's primary research entity—stated that while it has consistently tracked and identified increases in the number of agency outputs, measuring the effectiveness of law enforcement activities is complex. For example, they do not have the capacity to demonstrate whether a crime's rate of occurrence changed as a result of agency outputs or from a number of unrelated factors. In addition, DOJ officials told us that while some of the statutory requirements are not included in the National Strategy, each relevant component or agency is responsible for implementing several of the requirements at the component level, such as establishing budget priorities.

While developing some of the statutorily required elements may present challenges, the Act does require that DOJ include all 19 elements in the

⁶⁶34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(4).

⁶⁷34 U.S.C. § 21111(c)(2).

National Strategy.⁶⁸ In addition, the missing elements may impact DOJ's efforts to combat online exploitation of children. Moreover, the Department has demonstrated that it is capable of developing some of the required elements. For example, each year, the FBI undergoes an annual budget process that enables its field offices to better prioritize and allocate resources called the dynamic alignment of resources to threats process. FBI field offices use this process to propose realignment of agent resources to better meet the actual threat picture in their metropolitan areas and communities. Each office considers what threat they are going to target, the information needed to mitigate the threat, and which operational capabilities will need to surge in order to best mitigate the threat, considering both national and regional threats. In the Department's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, the FBI established a goal and annual performance measure intended to measure its success in protecting children from crime and exploitation.⁶⁹ Specifically, FBI set a goal of 46 percent for its crimes-against-children cases that address abductions, hands-on offenders, sextortion, or enticement. The annual performance measure for this goal is the percent of crimes-against-children FBI cases that address abductions, hands-on offenders, sextortion, or enticement.

As of December 2022, DOJ officials have not provided us with sufficient documentation to fully describe the extent to which they intend to include all required elements in future updates of the National Strategy. In addition to the National Strategy not being updated, the missing required elements in the 2016 strategy may impact DOJ's efforts to combat online exploitation of children. For example, without annual measurable objectives and specific targets to accomplish goals, DOJ cannot assess the National Strategy's impact, nor is it clear to Congress what DOJ, in coordination with other federal agencies and state, local, tribal, and non-governmental partners, is working toward in the future.

Conclusions

Children are among our most vulnerable populations. Reported instances of the online exploitation of children have increased dramatically in recent years. Further, the current landscape, including technology advancements, increased online access, and increased use of encryption heighten already-existing investigative challenges law enforcement faces. The federal government's fight against online child exploitation includes a

⁶⁸34 U.S.C. § 21111(c).

⁶⁹Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General, *FYs 2022-2026 Strategic Plan* (Washington, D.C.: July 1, 2022).

myriad of activities from multiple federal agencies that include helping investigators, educating children and their caregivers about how to avoid dangerous individuals, and mitigating vulnerabilities in the online landscape that make exploitation possible.

Recognizing the need for an overall strategy to combat exploitation of children, the Congress passed the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008, which requires the Attorney General to create and implement a national strategy that must (a) be issued every two years; (b) have a senior official appointed to lead its development; and (c) include 19 elements within the strategy itself. But our analysis shows that DOJ's national strategy not only lacks a full-time senior official leading DOJ's efforts, but it also has not been updated since 2016, and is incomplete because it does not include all 19 required statutory elements. Since the issuance of its last strategy in 2016, the online landscape has evolved and so have the tactics used by those attempting to exploit children online.

An updated strategy, incorporating all of the requirements from the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008, could strengthen DOJ's ability to address the online exploitation of children in the most efficient and effective manner possible and better align the strategy with more recent child exploitation challenges. It could also help the department ensure that it can properly assess the strategy's impact and coordinate with other federal, state, local, tribal and non-governmental partners to work toward common goals in the future and keep Congress informed of any changes and challenges to the department's ability to meet the statutory requirements.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The Attorney General should ensure that the department updates the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction to fully address all statutory requirements, including appointment of a senior official, inclusion of all 19 statutory elements for the strategy, and issuance of the strategy every two years.

Agency Comments

We requested comments on a draft of this report from the entities included in our review. Six entities (DOD, Department of Education, DHS, DOJ, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of State) provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. We also received correspondence from the United States Postal Inspection Service stating it reviewed the draft report and had no further comments. Further, the DOJ neither agreed nor disagreed with our recommendation to the department.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Attorney General, the Secretaries of Homeland Security, State, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services and the United States Postal Inspection Service. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8777, goodwing@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gretta L. Goodwin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "G".

Gretta L. Goodwin
Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues

List of Requesters

The Honorable Margaret Wood Hassan
Chair
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Spending Oversight
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Marsha Blackburn
United States Senate

The Honorable Anthony Gonzalez
House of Representatives

The Honorable Ann McLane Kuster
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Examples of Factors Contributing to Growth in Online Exploitation of Children

The volume, complexity, and danger of sexual exploitation of children online are increasing. This creates challenges for federal agencies, in particular law enforcement, in addressing the issue. As shown in table 2, a number of factors including increased online access, livestreaming, and the rise of encryption are contributing to offending rates.

Table 2: Examples of Factors Contributing to Growth in Online Exploitation of Children

Factor	Description/Concern
High-speed internet connectivity and availability	Internet infrastructure across the globe has grown exponentially, allowing for relatively easy access, which provides inexpensive and easy opportunities to commit online exploitation of children, according to Department of Justice officials and a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance threat assessment. ^a
Increase in mobile devices	The number of active mobile devices in the world is expected to reach 17.62 billion by 2024 – an increase of 3.7 billion devices compared to 2020 levels, according to a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment.
Age of internet users decreasing	Under 18s now account for one in three internet users across the globe, according to a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment.
Storage	The price of storage devices has decreased, while their capacity has increased. Cloud storage makes it possible to share child sexual abuse material by simply posting a link in a forum, on a platform or through direct messaging, to thereby reach more offenders, more quickly.
End-to-end encryption	End-to-end encryption enables more offenders, including those who are less technically aware, to share child sexual abuse material, tips and tradecraft securely and anonymously, according to a 2019 and a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment.
Livestreaming	Livestreaming is on the rise, enabled by connectivity and the availability of inexpensive streaming devices. Available data indicates that the individuals who “consume” livestreamed abuse are predominantly from Europe, North America and Australia according to a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment. The majority of identified livestreaming victims live in South-East Asia, in particular the Philippines, according to the same threat assessment.
Dark Web	The dark web hides the most extreme content and enables sharing and networking across offender communities. Dark web communities often require that perpetrators produce new child sexual exploitation and abuse material to gain access and achieve status in the community.

Appendix I: Examples of Factors Contributing to Growth in Online Exploitation of Children

Factor	Description/Concern
Social media and communications platforms	Publicly-accessible social media and communications platforms remain the most common methods for meeting and grooming children online. In 2018, Facebook Messenger was responsible for nearly 12 million of the 18.4 million worldwide reports of child sexual abuse material, according to a 2019 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment.
Gaming	Gaming platforms pose complex child safety challenges because within such environments, interactions between adults and children are relatively normalized, according to a 2021 WeProtect Global Alliance global threat assessment. For the gaming industry, chat rooms, voice calls and livestreams have provided more ways for offenders to initiate contact with children and begin the grooming process, according to the threat assessment.
Cultural Norms	Shifting cultural norms around image sharing and adult sexual interactions online are changing the landscape around how social media and the internet are used. Child 'self-generated' material comprises an increasing proportion of child sexual abuse content. For example, according to an anonymous online survey of a non-probability sample of 2,002 minors living in the U.S. in 2020, 28% of minors ages nine to seventeen self-reported that they believe 'it's normal for people my age to share nudes with each other'. This estimate was similar to that found in 2019 by the same organization. ^b
COVID-19	COVID-19 resulted in more children and offenders online than before the pandemic. This increase in activity is likely due to a confluence of factors, including: (1) increased internet usage by children who are spending more time online, both unsupervised and during traditional school hours; (2) restricted travel during the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in more sex offenders being online; and (3) increased access to and use of technology, including encrypted communications, bulk data transfer, cloud storage, live-streaming, and anonymized transactions.

Source: GAO analysis of information from the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, FinCEN Calls Attention to Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crimes, FIN-2021-NTC3 (September 16, 2021), National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, WeProtect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2019 (London, United Kingdom: 2019), and WeProtect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2021 (London, United Kingdom: 2021). | GAO-23-105260

^aWeProtect Global Alliance is a non-profit international organization dedicated to bringing together governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

^bThorn conducted both surveys in 2019 and 2020 and drew on a self-selected sample of youth across the U.S. between the ages of 9 and 17. The survey relied on quota sampling and survey weighting to improve representativeness by gender, age, race, education, and geography. The use of self-reported information and an anonymized online design may increase underreporting which the researchers sought to address through question design and anonymity. See, Thorn, Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Youth Attitudes and Experiences in 2020 (Manhattan Beach, Calif.: November 2021).

[https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/SGCSAM_Attitudes&Experiences_YouthMonitoring_FullReport_2021_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/SGCSAM_Attitudes&Experiences_YouthMonitoring_FullReport_2021_FINAL%20(1).pdf), and Thorn, Self-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material: Attitudes and Experiences (Manhattan Beach, Calif.: August 2020).
https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/08112020_SG-CSAM_AttitudesExperiences-Report_2019.pdf

Appendix II: Key Federal Agencies Involved in Combating Online Exploitation of Children

Federal entities have a variety of roles and responsibilities for addressing online exploitation of children. Table 3 presents 24 key federal entities' related roles and responsibilities with respect to developing strategies, conducting prosecutions and investigations, sharing information, education and outreach efforts, and conducting research.

**Appendix II: Key Federal Agencies Involved in
Combating Online Exploitation of Children**

Table 3: Federal Agencies with Roles in Combating Online Exploitation of Children

Agency / component	Role in addressing online exploitation of children
Department of Justice (DOJ) The Attorney General	— Responsible for creating and implementing a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.
Office of the Deputy Attorney General	Directs all of DOJ's efforts to combat child exploitation. Houses an appointed National Coordinator for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction who is responsible for coordinating the formulation and implementation of the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, and to liaise with federal, state, local, and international groups to foster further cooperation in this area.
Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Child Exploitation Operational Unit	Conducts investigations, provides a web-based program that teaches students how to recognize and respond appropriately to online dangers, and manages programs to identify unknown child victims depicted in child sexual exploitation material (child sexual abuse material). In addition, the Child Exploitation Operational Unit builds tools and capabilities for online investigations, including Dark Web related tools. The FBI also has detailees at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to review information provided to NCMEC's CyberTipline.
Violent Crimes Section Crimes Against Children and Human Trafficking Unit	Leads 85 Child Exploitation Human Trafficking Task Forces located throughout the country.
Criminal Division, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section	Investigates and prosecutes federal child sexual exploitation offenses, particularly those that are facilitated through technology, including production and trafficking of child sexual abuse material, child sex trafficking, online coercion and enticement, and extraterritorial child sexual abuse. Also initiates investigations and conducts forensic analysis on digital evidence, identifies and addresses policy and legislative concerns, and provides training and advice to domestic and international investigators and prosecutors.
U.S. Attorneys' Offices	Prosecutes crimes against children as part of the Project Safe Childhood program, a coordinated prosecution and training effort that includes every type of federal crime involving sexual violence against children.
Office of Justice Programs Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)	Awards grants to various entities that conduct or support investigations and prosecutions. Is the primary revenue source for NCMEC. Also provides funding and training support for the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) program, a national network of 61 coordinated task forces representing more than 5,400 federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies. In addition, OJJDP funds the Amber Alert Training and Technical Assistance Program. OJJDP grants are also used to educate parents and youth about the potential dangers of online activity.
U.S. Marshals Service Sex Offender Investigations Branch	Assists law enforcement in fugitive cases involving the sexual exploitation of a child. The U.S. Marshals Service also works closely with NCMEC to recover missing and exploited children.
INTERPOL Washington	Exchanges criminal investigative data with international counterparts on behalf of the more than 18,000 federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in the United States.

**Appendix II: Key Federal Agencies Involved in
Combating Online Exploitation of Children**

Agency / component	Role in addressing online exploitation of children
Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)	<p>ICE HSI's Cyber Crimes Center oversees and coordinates investigations of cyber-related criminal activity, bringing together all cyber investigations with computer forensics assets in one location. The Cyber Crimes Center is home to the Child Exploitation Investigations Unit, the Computer Forensics Unit, and the Cyber Crimes Unit. The Child Exploitation Investigations Unit manages Operation Predator, which investigates, interdicts, and refers for prosecution individuals involved in the possession, receipt, distribution, transportation, advertisement, and production of child sexual abuse material, any individuals engaged in illicit sexual conduct with minors, and any individuals traveling to a foreign country with the intent to engage in sexual activity with children. ICE HSI participates on all 61 ICAC Task Forces across the United States. HSI conducts an educational and outreach program for kids and adults called Project iGuardian. ICE HSI's National Victim Identification Program at its Cyber Crimes Center employs the latest technology in investigations to rescue child victims of sexual exploitation. The Computer Forensics Unit has personnel trained to perform forensic examinations of seized digital storage devices and media, such as computer hard drives, flash drives, personal digital assistants, mobile phones, DVDs, CDs, tablets, and tape media.</p>
Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans	<p>Responsible for coordinating the Department's efforts to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse through the development and release of a strategic framework. In addition, responsible for developing the Implementation Plan for the DHS Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking, the Importation of Goods Produced with Forced Labor, and Child Sexual Exploitation, which was released in January 2020. Also, to lead (as of September 2022) the Five Country Ministerial Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Working Group, which includes the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.</p>
Secret Service	<p>Provides forensic and investigative assistance in support of investigations involving missing or exploited children at the request of NCMEC or any state or local law enforcement agency. Operates a prevention education outreach program to educate parents and children regarding trends and tactics related to child exploitation and abduction.</p>
Science and Technology Directorate	<p><i>Performs research</i> and development in support of DHS operational components and other federal, state, and local government stakeholders and international law enforcement stakeholders.</p>
United States Postal Service U.S. Postal Inspection Service	<p>— Investigates sexual exploitation of children when it involves the U.S. mail. Provides guidance and assistance to law enforcement agencies throughout the United States and abroad.</p>
Department of Defense Naval Criminal Investigative Service Army Criminal Investigation Division United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations	<p>Various agencies within the Department of Defense contribute to the fight against child exploitation through investigations and prosecutions, as well as prevention and awareness efforts directed towards military service members and their families. Among other efforts, the Military Criminal Investigative Organizations investigate allegations of online child exploitation with a nexus to the Department of Defense. The Military Criminal Investigative Organization investigators conduct proactive and reactive child exploitation investigations, examine and exploit digital evidence of child exploitation, participate in local Internet Crimes Against Children task forces, and assign liaison officers to NCMEC. These investigative organizations include Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Army Criminal Investigation Division, and United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations.</p>

**Appendix II: Key Federal Agencies Involved in
Combating Online Exploitation of Children**

Agency / component	Role in addressing online exploitation of children
Health and Human Services	—
Family and Youth Services Bureau	Builds the capacity of funded projects through training and technical assistance to prevent and respond to potential online exploitation and victimization incidents among youth served by their programs. Fosters collaborations and partnerships to enhance knowledge and develop resources on the intersection of online exploitation, online risk-behaviors, online grooming, and vulnerable youth.
Office on Trafficking in Persons	Funds direct services and provides access to apply for public benefits for individuals who have experienced human trafficking, including children who experience online commercial sexual exploitation. Provides education and awareness resources for individuals who are at risk or who have experienced human trafficking, and training and technical assistance for the professionals who interact with them. Funds local education agencies to educate staff and students about all forms of human trafficking, including online commercial sexual exploitation. Collects and assesses data on human trafficking trends, including technology-facilitated child trafficking.
The Department of Education Office of Safe and Supportive Schools Office of Educational Technology	Raises awareness and tries to prevent domestic human trafficking and exploitation amongst school-aged youth. Informs school leaders, faculty, and students about the problem; helps schools understand how the problem relates to teaching and learning and why it is important for schools to address it; embeds the issue in schools' emergency operations and management planning; and works with other federal agencies, state and local agencies, and public sector stakeholders to develop and disseminate resource material. This work is accomplished in large part through the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, coordinates interagency efforts and administers grant programs and technical assistance centers addressing school community safety and health and administers work focusing on human trafficking, which may include child exploitation. In addition, the Office of Educational Technology provides related policies and guidance to encourage safe and responsible use of technology and development of digital literacy skills.
Department of State	—
Bureau of Consular Affairs	Has the lead role in dealing with individual cases of child exploitation involving private U.S. citizens/nationals.
Bureau of Diplomatic Security	Bureau of Diplomatic Security regional security officers provide investigative support and liaise with host government police authorities in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.
Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons	Leads the U.S. government's global engagement on human trafficking; compiles the Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report; pursues policies, programs, and partnerships to combat human trafficking, including forced child labor and child sex trafficking; and supports the Secretary of State in his or her role as Chair of the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and interagency anti-trafficking work.
The Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs' Office of Private Sector Exchange Administration	Provides guidance to sponsors to identify, report, and/or mitigate situations in which online exploitation of children might occur to foreign minors in the U.S. on exchange programs. Educational and Cultural Affairs' Law Enforcement Liaison Officers collect, coordinate, and report suspected allegations of child exploitation or abuse to the appropriate law enforcement office/agency.
Office of Overseas Schools	Leads the development of child protection protocols for all overseas assisted and non-assisted schools. All assisted schools are required to have child protection policies and practices in place; otherwise, accreditation is not awarded.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, United States Postal Inspection Service, Department of Defense, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, and Department of State data. | GAO-23-105260

Appendix III: Establishment of National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, 34 U.S.C. § 21111

The PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 set forth the requirements for a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.

Table 4: The PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 requirements for a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction

(a) In general	The Attorney General of the United States shall create and implement a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction.
(b) Timing	Not later than 1 year after October 13, 2008, and on February 1 of every second year thereafter, the Attorney General shall submit to Congress the National Strategy established under subsection (a).

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**(c) Required
contents of
National Strategy**

The National Strategy established under subsection (a) shall include the following:

- (1) Comprehensive long-range, goals for reducing child exploitation.
 - (2) Annual measurable objectives and specific targets to accomplish long-term, quantifiable goals that the Attorney General determines may be achieved during each year beginning on the date when the National Strategy is submitted.
 - (3) Annual budget priorities and Federal efforts dedicated to combating child exploitation, including resources dedicated to Internet Crimes Against Children task forces, Project Safe Childhood, FBI Innocent Images Initiative, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, regional forensic computer labs, Internet Safety programs, and all other entities whose goal or mission is to combat the exploitation of children that receive Federal support.
 - (4) A 5-year projection for program and budget goals and priorities.
 - (5) A review of the policies and work of the Department of Justice related to the prevention and investigation of child exploitation crimes, including efforts at the Office of Justice Programs, the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice, the Executive Office for United States Attorneys, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of the Deputy Attorney General, the Office of Legal Policy, and any other agency or bureau of the Department of Justice whose activities relate to child exploitation.
 - (6) A description of the Department's efforts to coordinate with international, State, local, tribal law enforcement, and private sector entities on child exploitation prevention and interdiction efforts.
 - (7) Plans for interagency coordination regarding the prevention, investigation, and apprehension of individuals exploiting children, including cooperation and collaboration with—
 - (A) Immigration and Customs Enforcement;
 - (B) the United States Postal Inspection Service;
 - (C) the Department of State;
 - (D) the Department of Commerce;
 - (E) the Department of Education;
 - (F) the Department of Health and Human Services; and
 - (G) other appropriate Federal agencies.
 - (8) A review of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program, including—
 - (A) the number of ICAC task forces and location of each ICAC task force;
 - (B) the number of trained personnel at each ICAC task force;
 - (C) the amount of Federal grants awarded to each ICAC task force;
 - (D) an assessment of the Federal, State, and local cooperation in each task force, including—
 - (i) the number of arrests made by each task force;
 - (ii) the number of criminal referrals to United States attorneys for prosecution;
 - (iii) the number of prosecutions and convictions from the referrals made under clause (ii);
 - (iv) the number, if available, of local prosecutions and convictions based on ICAC task force investigations; and
 - (v) any other information demonstrating the level of Federal, State, and local coordination and cooperation, as such information is to be determined by the Attorney General;
 - (E) an assessment of the training opportunities and technical assistance available to support ICAC task force grantees; and
 - (F) an assessment of the success of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program at leveraging State and local resources and matching funds.
 - (9) An assessment of the technical assistance and support available for Federal, State, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies, in the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of child exploitation crimes.
 - (10) A review of the backlog of forensic analysis for child exploitation cases at each FBI Regional Forensic lab and an estimate of the backlog at State and local labs.
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**Appendix III: Establishment of National
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- (11) Plans for reducing the forensic backlog described in paragraph (10), if any, at Federal, State and local forensic labs.
- (12) A review of the Federal programs related to child exploitation prevention and education, including those related to Internet safety, including efforts by the private sector and nonprofit entities, or any other initiatives that have proven successful in promoting child safety and Internet safety.
- (13) An assessment of the future trends, challenges, and opportunities, including new technologies, that will impact Federal, State, local, and tribal efforts to combat child exploitation.
- (14) Plans for liaisons with the judicial branches of the Federal and State governments on matters relating to child exploitation.
- (15) An assessment of Federal investigative and prosecution activity relating to reported incidents of child exploitation crimes, which shall include a number of factors, including—
- (A) the number of high-priority suspects (identified because of the volume of suspected criminal activity or because of the danger to the community or a potential victim) who were investigated and prosecuted;
 - (B) the number of investigations, arrests, prosecutions and convictions for a crime of child exploitation; and
 - (C) the average sentence imposed and statutory maximum for each crime of child exploitation.
- (16) A review of all available statistical data indicating the overall magnitude of child pornography trafficking in the United States and internationally, including—
- (A) the number of computers or computer users, foreign and domestic, observed engaging in, or suspected by law enforcement agencies and other sources of engaging in, peer-to-peer file sharing of child pornography;
 - (B) the number of computers or computer users, foreign and domestic, observed engaging in, or suspected by law enforcement agencies and other reporting sources of engaging in, buying and selling, or other commercial activity related to child pornography;
 - (C) the number of computers or computer users, foreign and domestic, observed engaging in, or suspected by law enforcement agencies and other sources of engaging in, all other forms of activity related to child pornography;
 - (D) the number of tips or other statistical data from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline and other data indicating the magnitude of child pornography trafficking; and
 - (E) any other statistical data indicating the type, nature, and extent of child exploitation crime in the United States and abroad.
- (17) Copies of recent relevant research and studies related to child exploitation, including—
- (A) studies related to the link between possession or trafficking of child pornography and actual abuse of a child;
 - (B) studies related to establishing a link between the types of files being viewed or shared and the type of illegal activity; and
 - (C) any other research, studies, and available information related to child exploitation.
- (18) A review of the extent of cooperation, coordination, and mutual support between private sector and other entities and organizations and Federal agencies, including the involvement of States, local and tribal government agencies to the extent Federal programs are involved.
- (19) The results of the Project Safe Childhood Conference or other conferences or meetings convened by the Department of Justice related to combating child exploitation.
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**Appendix III: Establishment of National
Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and
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**(d) Appointment of
high-level official**

(1) In general

The Attorney General shall designate a senior official at the Department of Justice with experience in investigating or prosecuting child exploitation cases as the National Coordinator for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction who shall be responsible for coordinating the development of the National Strategy established under subsection (a). The National Coordinator for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction shall be a position in the Senior Executive Service.

(2) Duties

The duties of the official designated under paragraph (1) shall include—

- (A)** acting as a liaison with all Federal agencies regarding the development of the National Strategy;
- (B)** working to ensure that there is proper coordination among agencies in developing the National Strategy;
- (C)** being knowledgeable about budget priorities and familiar with all efforts within the Department of Justice and the FBI related to child exploitation prevention and interdiction; and
- (D)** communicating the National Strategy to Congress and being available to answer questions related to the strategy at congressional hearings, if requested by committees of appropriate jurisdictions, on the contents of the National Strategy and progress of the Department of Justice in implementing the National Strategy.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105260

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact above, Jan Montgomery, Assistant General Counsel, Janet Temko-Blinder, Assistant General Counsel, Tonnye' Conner-White (Assistant Director), Gary M. Malavenda (Analyst-in-Charge), Benjamin Crossley, Dominick Dale, Pamela Davidson, Christine Davis, Andrea Dawson, Leia Dickerson, Jeff R. Jensen, Benjamin T. Licht, Samantha Lyew, Hadley Nobles, Lauren Ostrander, Lerone Reid, Kate Sharkey, Julia Singer, and Sarah Veale all made key contributions to this report.

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