

Comments – Ernie Allen, Chair, WeProtect Global Alliance
Safer Internet Day
Safer Internet Centre
Russian Center for Missing & Exploited Children
February 8, 2022

I am delighted to be with you for this anniversary celebration. I had the great honor of meeting Urvan and Mark many years ago and have followed the extraordinary progress of your Centre. Congratulations on your years of leadership and advocacy on behalf of Russia's children.

I speak to you today in my role as Chair of the WeProtect Global Alliance: an independent alliance of 98 countries; 52 technology companies; 64 civil society organizations; and 9 international bodies, including INTERPOL, UNICEF, and others. Some brief history. In 2012 the European Union and the United States launched the Global Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Online. The then-Justice Minister of Denmark, Morten Bods kov, said, *“the Internet knows no boundaries, and neither should we in the way we handle this issue.”*

Two years later, in 2014, concerned that governments would not be able to solve this problem alone, then-UK Prime Minister David Cameron created WeProtect in order to launch a true global partnership, bringing together governments with technology industry leaders, civil society and international organizations, working together to address this problem. At the first WeProtect Summit, the Prime Minister said, *“the online exploitation of children is happening on an almost industrial scale.”* He called it *“a major international crime of our age.”* He asked that I serve as Chair of this new global initiative.

In 2015 we convened the second WeProtect Summit in Abu Dhabi in the UAE. At that Summit we decided to merge the EU/US Global Alliance with WeProtect, creating a single, unified WeProtect Global Alliance. It was initially housed and supported by the UK government, but in 2020 we established it as an independent international alliance, organized in the Netherlands.

The WeProtect Global Alliance created a Model National Response being used by nations worldwide. It has worked with technology industry leaders to develop and implement new technology tools to counter online child sexual exploitation. It has partnered with civil society organizations to better identify, rescue and help child victims. It has collaborated with leading international bodies to better address these issues on a broader basis than just one country at a time.

We have made considerable progress. But in 2019 the New York Times wrote, *“Twenty years ago, online images were a problem; 10 years ago, an epidemic. Now, the crisis is at a breaking point.”* That is my message to you today. The crisis is at a breaking point.

As I speak to leaders around the world, I continue to hear, “this might be a problem somewhere else, but it isn't a problem in my country.” Are they right? How serious is the problem globally?

In October 2021 we released our latest Global Threat Assessment, concluding that the problem is serious and getting worse. Some quick examples:

- In my 28 years leading the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in the US, we never handled as many as 1 million reports in any year. I stepped down in 2012. In 2020 NCMEC handled 21.7 million reports of online child sexual abuse material from around the world, involving 65 million images and videos;
- INHOPE, the global network of internet hotlines, reported that 89% of its reports of child sexual abuse material involved children between the ages of 3 and 13;
- UNICEF estimates that 1 in 3 internet users is a child.
- In 2018 INTERPOL estimated that 1.8 million men with sexual interest in children were newly online. That number has grown during the pandemic.

How is this possible? Prior to the internet, someone with sexual interest in children felt isolated, aberrant, alone. Today he is part of a global community. He can share images, fantasies, techniques, and even real children with people just like him all over the world. And he can do it all with virtual anonymity.

As part of our Threat Assessment, we asked Economist Impact, the research arm of the Economist news magazine, to conduct a global survey of young adults regarding their online experiences as children. The Economist interviewed 5,000 18 – 20 year olds in 54 countries in order to measure how many had experienced online sexual harm as children.

We explored various types of sexual harm online, including being sent sexually explicit content by an adult, having sexually explicit images of themselves shared online without their consent; being asked by an adult to do something sexually explicit online, and more.

The results were stunning. 54% were victimized during their childhood. The victimization rate for girls was higher than boys. Minorities were at particular risk. 65% of LGBT+; 59% of transgender/non-binary; 58% of ethnic and racial minorities; and 57% of disabled youth.

But perhaps the most important finding was that online child sexual exploitation is a problem in every region of the world. The highest victimization rate occurred in the US and Canada (71%); followed by Australia and New Zealand (67%); and Western Europe (65%). But no region was immune. There was a 59% victimization rate in Central America; 57% in Southern Africa; and 52% in Southeast Asia. The lowest recorded rate was 44% occurring in three regions: the Middle East and North Africa; East Asia; and Eastern Europe and Russia.

To put this in context, in no region of the world was the victimization rate lower than 44%. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that this crisis has already impacted at least half of the world's children. Particularly disturbing is that most of these interactions happen in private. 68% of the victims used private messaging services. Another troubling finding was that the average age of first victimization is 12. There is a clear trend to younger and younger kids.

But there is also progress. The Technology Coalition, an association of major tech companies, surveyed 32 companies: 87% reported using image hash-matching tools to detect, report and remove child sexual abuse material. Yet, just 37% are using tools to detect online grooming, a problem that has doubled during the pandemic. Thus, much of this activity still goes undetected. Even with all of our progress, most online sexual abuse and exploitation of children remains under-recognized, under-appreciated and under-reported.

There is another on-going battle today with global implications. Privacy advocates argue that the use of technology tools to detect, report and remove child sexual abuse material and stop online grooming of children is illegal and violates the privacy rights of users. On March 2 the European Union will present a proposal for new law to resolve that conflict. It will trigger a major debate.

The WeProtect Global Alliance has been heavily involved. We have spoken with European leaders, NGOs, UN officials and others. But we have also met with privacy advocates, arguing that privacy and child protection are not mutually exclusive. They are in fact compatible.

We are pro-privacy, but ask, "whose privacy?" Privacy rights are not absolute. Each child sexual abuse image is a crime scene photo, an image of the rape or sexual assault of a child. There is a growing global effort to report and remove these images, identify and rescue the child victims, and bring perpetrators to justice.

In conclusion, we are proud of the progress, but there is much more to do. We are grateful to Urvan, Mark and all of you for your remarkable advocacy and leadership. But our Global Threat Assessment makes it clear that we are in a period of crisis and that this problem is touching every part of the world, including Russia. We are committed to working with you. Technology has fundamentally altered the way those with sexual interest in children access them and prey upon them. But this crisis is not yet a priority on global policy agendas. You can help us change that.