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Child Sexual Exploitation Public Awareness Research

Executive Summary

Prepared for Public Safety Canada

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Final Report- Executive Summary

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March 2020

This public opinion research report presents the results of an online survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs on behalf of Public Safety Canada. The research study was conducted with over 2,000 Canadians, including parents, between February and March 2020.

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Child sexual exploitation public awareness research – quantitative

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) online is a pressing and severe public safety issue in Canada, and internationally. This crime is on the rise and continues to increase significantly because of new technological advances. These technological advances—combined with low cost and anonymity—are contributing factors to this growing problem, allowing child sex offenders to easily recruit (luring and grooming) and coerce (sextortion) children.

There is an urgent need to focus on effective prevention and awareness of CSE online, given the alarming rate at which this crime is growing, and a need for improved data collection, increased research efforts, and enhanced information exchange at the national level, to better understand the underpinnings and contributing factors surrounding online CSE.

PSC has led the National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation on the Internet since 2004. The National Strategy was launched to provide a focal point for federal efforts to combat this crime. The focus was put on law enforcement capacity, research, prevention and education activities, as well as support for Cybertip.ca, Canada's national tip line for reporting online CSE and child abuse. Since the National Strategy's renewal in 2009, the technological landscape has changed considerably and because of this, the National Strategy has been enhanced to ensure it reflects today's reality.

1.2 Research Objectives

Quantitative research

This research is intended to obtain data about people's perception, awareness, and understanding about online child sexual exploitation activities across Canada. The objectives of the research are to establish a quantitative baseline of the state of public opinion on child sexual exploitation online, including awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. The data obtained will help identify and establish which segment(s) of the Canadian population should be targeted through a social marketing campaign intended to increase awareness, knowledge, and public support that will enhance the protection of children from online sexual exploitation. The research will also help identify how to change the behaviour of Canadians through addressing gaps about the causes and effects of online CSE and enhance Canadians' ability and willingness to identify online CSE.

1.3 Methodology

These are the results of the **Public Safety Canada Online Child Sexual Exploitation Survey** conducted online from February 25th to March 4th, 2020.

The survey was conducted among two sample groups:

- Canadians aged 18 and over (General Population)
- Canadians aged 18 and over with at least one child between the ages 8 and 17 (Parents)

Child Sexual Exploitation Public Awareness Research
Findings from Quantitative Research

The overall sample size of the survey was n=2,072 including n= 1,119 Canadians 18 and over (General Population), and n=953 Canadian parents with a child aged 8-17 (Parents). Respondents to the survey were drawn from Ipsos' online panel sample sources making it a non-probability sample.

Due to the non-probabilistic nature of the research, a known sampling limitation is that the results cannot be extrapolated to the rest of the Canadian population. However, online panel surveys like the one conducted, are commonly used in the public opinion and market research industry and provide useful insights on the knowledge and opinion of the Canadian population as the samples are designed to be representative of the population, regionally, demographically and socio-economically. Moreover, the large sample size on which the current survey is based (greater than n=2,000) ensures the insights are highly reliable.

Quotas and weighting were employed to ensure that each sample's composition reflects the characteristics of the latest (2016) Census data. The general population sample group was weighted by:

- Generation (age within gender)
- Region (Province)
- Parental Status

The parent sample group was weighted by

- Age
- Gender
- Region (Province)

The precision of online surveys is measured using a credibility interval. In this case, the overall findings of the research are accurate to within $\pm 3.3\%$, 19 times out of 20 for the general population, and within $\pm 3.6\%$, 19 times out of 20 for parents of children aged 8-17. The credibility interval will be wider for subsets of the population.

To help the reader understand how opinions of the general population and parents are similar and different on this topic, the results obtained from these groups are reported separately. Although there is a natural incidence of parents within the general population sample, for the purpose of the report, the results reported for questions identified as being appropriate to only the parent's population are based on the designated parent sample only (n=953).

The survey instrument consisted of a series of closed-end and open-end questions designed in consultation with Public Safety Canada. The survey was offered in both official languages and averaged 14 minutes in length for parents of children aged 8-17, and 5 minutes in length for the general population.

2 Key Findings

Key Findings

- The survey found that the general population and parents of children aged 8-17 have a similar understanding of online child sexual exploitation and generally hold similar attitudes that the internet can pose a risk to kids.
- Most of the population, including parents of children aged 8-17, has at least a general understanding of what the term online child sexual exploitation refers to, including frequent mentions of, child pornography and online child abuse. Fewer than one in ten in Canadians (and the same proportion of parents of children aged 8-17) “don’t know” what online CSE is.
- However, there are aspects of online CSE that are less well-known. Relatively few mention sexting, sextortion, distribution of intimate images without permission, or adults who travel and connect with kids through online platforms to get sexual favours when asked to describe what online child sexual exploitation refers to.
- Despite most Canadians and Canadian parents having at least some understanding of online CSE, and nearly half of Canadians (46%) and six in ten parents of children aged 8-17 (57%) report having heard something about the issue of online CSE in the past 3 months, shockingly few believe online CSE is a big problem in their own neighbourhood. Most think about online CSE as an issue that happens “somewhere else”. Only 12% of parents and 9% of general population respondents consider online CSE a big problem in their neighbourhood.
- Notably there is no correlation between the level of concern parents have about online CSE as a local problem and incidents of parents who know their child interacts with strangers online. One in ten parents acknowledge their child interacts with strangers online, but there is little overlap with the same percentage who consider online CSE a big problem locally (12% respectively).
- In fact, there is only a weak correlation between parents coming across inappropriate behaviour geared towards their child, including concerning comments written to a child or images being shared among peers, and the belief that online CSE is a big problem in their neighbourhood. Nearly a quarter (23%) of parents have come across inappropriate behaviour geared towards their child online, yet only half (12%) consider online CSE a big problem locally. There is a more of correlation with actual incidences of online CSE in the community, but even then, the association with concern about CSE in the neighbourhood is not strong.
- The finding that only 4% of parents indicate their child has been the victim of online child sexual exploitation may suggest that some parents view online CSE quite narrowly and may not consider inappropriate behaviour including comments written to a child or images being shared among peers to constitute online CSE. There is likely an important opportunity to educate parents on the spectrum of exploitation, sextortion, luring and grooming etc.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, given few parents believe online CSE is a big problem in their neighbourhood, fewer than half of parents are actively safeguarding their children against online CSE with 45% reporting that they monitor their children’s online activity mostly/always, and nearly half having conversations about who their child interacts with online (48%), what they talk to others about (43%), and what sites they visit (43%) on a weekly basis or more frequently. *Consistent with the weaker understanding of sexting and sextortion that parents have, nearly half of parents also admit to having never spoken to their children about sextortion (46%) or sexting (42%).*
- Of great concern, particularly with the belief among parents that online CSE is not a big issue

in their neighbourhood, fully one-third (33%) of parents report that their child has approached them about questionable online activity and nearly a quarter of parents (23%) have seen for themselves inappropriate behavior geared towards their child.

- Parents admit barriers to protecting their child from online CSE. The most common barriers are a lack of information about how to speak to their child, lack of confidence about having the conversation, and having the time needed to discuss/monitor their children's online activities (less than half say it is a habit to discuss internet safety at home): less than half of parents speak to their child about what they talk to others about online (43%) or what sites they're visiting online (43%) weekly or more.
- Parents are seeking information on a variety of topics related to online CSE including, how to recognize the signs and symptoms, available/additional privacy and security measures, how to speak to their children about online CSE, and the laws or resources (i.e. help lines) they can access for help.
- A knowledge gap also exists for parents in understanding what schools do to guard against online CSE -- 55% of parents of children aged 8-17 do not know what their child's school is doing to safeguard against online CSE, pointing to an important communication opportunity.
- There is a relationship between hearing about the issue online CSE,¹ being aware of cybertip.ca, and being able to take the necessary steps to safeguard against CSE. Parents who have heard about the issue of online CSE recently (past 3 months) are also more likely to be aware of cybertip.ca- these two metrics tend to rise and fall together, often showing stronger attitudes towards child monitoring. Therefore, investing in building media around online CSE can contribute to stronger monitoring behaviours in parents. That said, when it comes to actually having the conversation, these parents still feel that talking to their children about internet safety may push them away, indicating that reminders about online CSE may not necessarily promote the conversation despite promoting greater monitoring.

3 SOCIAL MARKETING CONTENT AND TARGETS

- The research suggests that social marketing aimed at the following gaps in awareness and knowledge about online CSE would be useful:
 - increasing public and parental understanding that children (persons under 18) who engage in sexting could be at risk of online CSE; and
 - increasing awareness that online CSE could be happening in your own backyard or neighbourhood – it is not something that happens “somewhere else”.
- Making it clearer to the public and parents what constitutes online CSE and that their children are at risk increases the likelihood that parents will monitor their child's online activities and have discussions with their child more frequently. Notably, conversations with children may be harder to stimulate through increased awareness alone, but these conversations are important particularly for older children where parents have less interest and ability to monitor their child's online activities. Resources designed to help parents have those conversations are desired by parents and raising awareness of the issue can be expected to encourage parents to seek out these resources. How to spot the signs and

¹ Having heard about online CSE in the past 3 months

- symptom of online CSE are topics of most interest to parents.
- Regardless of whether the goal of the social marketing campaign is to promote more conversations between parents and children, increase parental monitoring behaviours, or help more parents spot the signs and symptoms of online CSE, the data suggests that the campaign needs to be inclusive of, and speak to the following:
 - parents of older children (aged 14+) as this segment needs stronger reminders of the importance of monitoring their child's online activity and providing them with advice on what conversations they should be having with their child to offer the best chance to keep them safe from online CSE;²
 - male parents who are less likely to speak with their children on the topic; and,
 - parents of male children, as they are less likely to speak with their child about sexting or sextortion, the issue of sending sexual images or videos online, what to do if they are asked to do something that makes them uncomfortable, and what to do if they know someone is being exploited.
 - Geographically, the campaign should be inclusive of urban parents as the data suggests that rural parents are more likely to believe online CSE is happening in their neighbourhood than urban parents. Regionally, Quebec parents indicate having a more difficult time bringing up internet safety with their child and getting them to speak about it, and therefore should be included in the campaign execution.
 - When it comes to the topics of sending sexual images online or sexting, indigenous parents lead the way- they are significantly more likely than non-indigenous parents to speak to their children about sending sexual images or videos online (40% vs. 15% non-indigenous), and sexting (27% vs. 13% non-indigenous). Despite this, the survey finds Indigenous parents and children are some of the most affected by online CSE. Indigenous parents are significantly more likely to indicate they have witnessed, or that their child has been a victim of, online CSE. This could be highlighted within the campaign as well.

² Parents of older children are more likely to say they "rarely/never" monitor their child's online activity. They are less likely to follow their child's social media and have their child's social media passwords. Parents of older children are less likely to take a "hands on" approach of sitting with their child while they're online or blocking sites. Although parents of older are more likely to say they can't keep up with the technology their child is using, they are also more likely to say their child goes online "somewhere else" (outside the home or school). This is especially significant since parents of older children are significantly more likely to have witnessed inappropriate behaviour or say their child has been a victim of online CSE.