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Online Child Sexual Exploitation Public Awareness Research

Summary

Prepared for Public Safety Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of an online survey conducted by EKOS Research Associates Inc. on behalf of Public Safety Canada. The research study was conducted with 1,139 members of the general public and 1,000 parents of children between the ages of 8 and 18, between January and February 2022.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Recherche sur la sensibilisation du public à l'exploitation sexuelle des enfants en ligne.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The Government of Canada’s National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation was launched in 2004 and expanded in 2009. In 2020, the *Voluntary Principles to Counter Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* was released to provide a framework to combat online sexual crimes against children and coordinate action between governments and industry partners. Canada’s Criminal Code serves to protect children from all forms of child pornography, the use of the internet to lure children, from sexual contact or touching, and the procurement of children for illicit sexual activity. Public Safety (PS) Canada has been leading the National Strategy. In 2020, PS launched a multi-year public education and awareness campaign on Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE). The campaign was a component of Budget 2019 that included \$4.90 million over three years to support efforts to suppress OCSE. The campaign is linked to the government’s priority, *Protecting Children from Sexual Exploitation Online*.

The objective of the current research is to track changes in awareness in the general public and among the target group of parents with children between the ages of 8 and 18 since the baseline was established in early 2020. It is also designed to measure changes in attitudes and behaviours related to online child sexual activity among parents, and through second-hand reporting, among children 8 to 18. Measurement of these changes since the start of the pandemic is particularly important given the changed environment with regard to time spent at home and in school-related learning online.

B. METHODOLOGY

The OCSE Public Awareness Research Survey was conducted online from January 14 to February 3, 2022. The survey included 1,000 Canadians aged 18 and over with at least one child between the ages of 8 and 18 and is compared with 1,139 members of the general public aged 18 and over. Each randomly recruited probability sample carries with it a margin of error of +/-3.2%. The margin of error for key segments within each sample is between +/-5% and +/-10%. The sample source is an in-house Probit panel of randomly recruited Canadians. The survey instrument was delivered online as well as by telephone and available in both official languages. The average length of the survey was 14 minutes online and 19 minutes by telephone. The overall response rate for the survey was 20%. Appendix A presents further details on the methodology for the survey.

C. KEY FINDINGS

Internet safety for children is a concern among both parents and the general public in Canada. Over two in three disagree that kids today live in a safe online environment. The majority agree that digital service providers should be able to proactively seek out child abuse material on their platforms, even if it meant less online personal privacy for Canadians.

About half of parents (50%) and the general public (47%) report hearing, reading, or seeing at least something about OCSE. Over four in five believe OCSE is a significant problem outside of Canada. The pattern is similar to 2020 results; over three in five feel OCSE is a problem in Canada, and half say it is a problem in their province. As jurisdictions narrow locally to their city or neighbourhood, relatively fewer perceive OCSE to be a problem.

Fewer than six in ten parents (57%) and members of the general public (53%) agree they would give up some of their online privacy rights in order to protect children from sexual exploitation online, a decrease from 66% in 2020.

Parents Behaviour

Parents outline the various ways their children are online; predominantly on a phone or tablet, home computer, school computer, or gaming system. One in three mostly or always monitor their child's online activity at home and a similar proportion rarely or never do. Among parents with children on social media, about two in three follow their child's social media at least some of the time. Monitoring is higher for younger children and decreases as they get older. Most parents (62%) report that their child interacts with friends and family only. As children get older, they are more likely to interact with friends of friends, celebrities, and parents of friends.

Parents more often talk about certain aspects of online activities with their child, including who they talk to or interact with, what they talk to others about, and what sites they are visiting. Other online activities are talked about less frequently, such as what to do if they are asked to do something that makes them uncomfortable, sending sexual images or videos online, if someone is being exploited online, privacy settings, and grooming. Some OCSE topics are never talked about by a portion of parents, such as capping, sextortion and sexting, although parents of older children are more likely to talk about these.

Motivations and Barriers to Discussions

When thinking of their ability to address OCSE with their child, nearly nine in ten parents say they feel responsible for talking to their child about internet safety, and about the same proportion disagree that they don't have time to talk to their child about their online activities. . Three in five feel they know how to talk about internet safety with their child. On the other hand, only one in seven say they keep resources about internet safety handy. One in three also feel they cannot keep up with the technology, apps and games their children are using and about the same proportion feel they do not know where to seek help about internet safety.

About half of parents agree that talking about internet safety with their child makes them feel good and makes them feel safe. Only four in ten, however, say this is a habit although this is more likely among those who have heard about OCSE, feel it's a problem locally, or have come across inappropriate behaviour.

Experience with online child sexual exploitation

Nearly half of parents report that their child has come to them to discuss questionable online activity that they have experienced or heard about from a friend or peer, and increase from 33% in 2020. Similar to 2020, one in four parents have come across inappropriate behaviour geared towards their child or other youth online. Five percent report that their child has been a victim of OCSE. Inappropriate behaviour online has affected mental health, social relationships, and performance at school or work, according to parents.

Almost all parents say the amount of time their child spends online has increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over half feel that the risk posed to their child from online activities has increased. With the transition to virtual learning, under half of parents say they monitor or supervise their child during virtual learning daily or almost daily.

Information about OCSE

Only about one in four parents have ever looked for information about OCSE and how to protect their kids. In terms of information needed, most parents would like information on how to recognize the signs and symptoms of OCSE or what privacy and security measures to take. Nearly half want information on how to talk to their children about OCSE. Most parents would like to find information through an internet website or to receive information through their child's school.

Cybertip.ca

Familiarity with Cybertip.ca continues to be low, with only 12% of parents and 9% of members of the general public saying they are somewhat or very familiar with the website and/or the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. Among those who have some familiarity with cybertip.ca, more have used it to access educational resources. Relatively few have signed up for alerts or filed a report.

D. NOTE TO READERS

Detailed findings are presented in the sections that follow. Overall results are presented in the main portion of the narrative and are typically supported by graphic or tabular presentation of results. Bulleted text is also used to point out any statistically and substantively significant differences between sub-groups of respondents. If differences are not noted in the report, it can be assumed that they are either not statistically significant¹ in their variation from the overall result or that the difference was deemed to be substantively too small to be noteworthy.

Parents with children aged 8 and 18 are a key target group, therefore results for this segment of 1,000 are isolated throughout the report; referred to simply as “parents”. The report also presents results for 1,139 members of the “general public”². Results are compared throughout the report with a similar sample collected between February 25th and March 4, 2020.

Results for the proportion of respondents in the sample who either said “don’t know” or did not provide a response may not be indicated in the graphic representation of the results in all cases, particularly where they are not sizable (e.g., 10% or less). Results may also not total to 100% due to rounding. The programmed survey instrument can be found in Appendix B.

¹ Chi-square and standard t-tests were applied as applicable. Differences noted were significant at the 95% level.

² This pool of 1,139 respondents includes a subset of 120 parents of children aged 8 to 18 also found in the “parent” sample in order for it to represent all Canadians.

E. POLITICAL NEUTRALITY CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Policy on Communications and Federal Identity and the Directive on the Management of Communications. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed by:



Susan Galley (Vice President)