

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Canada, 2014 to 2020

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Since 2014, when nationally representative cybercrime data first became available, the number of police-reported online child sexual exploitation and abuse incidents has generally been on an upward trend. These incidents involved online sexual offences against children, where a victim has been identified, as well as incidents of child pornography, where the actual child victim has not been identified by police. In 2020, the overall rate of online child sexual exploitation and abuse was 131 incidents per 100,000 children and youth compared with 50 incidents per 100,000 children and youth in 2014. While this crime may be on the rise in Canada, part of this increase could also be related to better training of police officers to detect this crime and increased willingness of victims to report.

Within the Canadian context, online child sexual exploitation and abuse encompasses a wide range of behaviours including those related to child sexual abuse material, sexting materials, sextortion, grooming and luring, live child sexual abuse streaming and made-to-order content.

In a *Juristat* article released today entitled "[Online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Canada: A statistical profile of police-reported incidents and court charges, 2014 to 2020](#)," an analysis shedding light on the characteristics of online child sexual exploitation and abuse incidents that came to the attention of police is presented. The article also examines related court charges and cases from adult criminal and youth courts in Canada.

Self-reported victimization studies have consistently found that, in general, only a fraction of sexual offences are reported to police. Other research suggests that crimes involving child victims are potentially even more underreported to authorities as some children may fear reporting, or may be unable or not know how to report or seek help.

Additionally, the proliferation of smart devices with instant messaging and live streaming capacities, along with improved anonymity capabilities allowing offenders to better hide their activities, increase the difficulty of investigating online child sexual exploitation and abuse. As a result, police-reported data likely underestimate the true extent of this form of abuse in Canada.

Information presented in the article, including trends and profiling of incident, victim and accused characteristics, provides a national reference for informing policies and programs aimed at combatting crimes of this nature.

Increases in online child sexual exploitation and abuse continue during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic

From 2014 to 2020, police reported a total of 10,739 incidents of online sexual offences against children (where the victim has been identified by police) and 29,028 incidents of online child pornography (where the victim has not been identified). For this seven-year period, luring accounted for the majority (77%) of online sexual offences against children (where a victim was identified), followed by the non-consensual distribution of intimate images (11%), invitation to sexual touching (8%) and other online sexual offences against children (5%). More than two-thirds (68%) of child pornography incidents involved making or distributing child pornography, and close to one-third (32%) involved possessing or accessing child pornography.

In 2020, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, cybercrime in general was on the rise with 31% more police-reported cybercrime incidents than in 2019. In 2020, the rate of police-reported online child pornography (101 incidents per 100,000 children and youth) was 35% higher than in 2019, while the rate of online sexual offences against children was 10% higher (30 incidents per 100,000 children and youth in 2020, versus 27 per 100,000 in 2019).

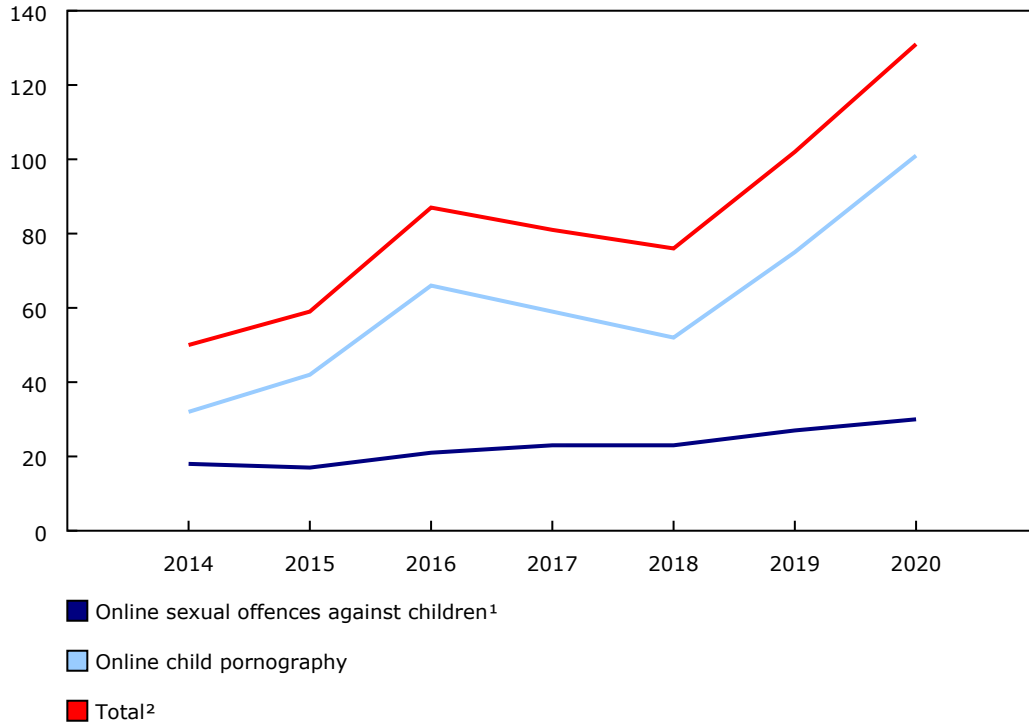
These increases contrast starkly with the overall year-over-year decrease in police-reported crime rates—including sexual assaults. The overall decline in police-reported crime from 2019 to 2020 followed several years of increases. However, a decrease in some types of crime was expected, as lockdown restrictions brought about in response to



the COVID-19 pandemic meant there were fewer opportunities for in-person crimes to take place, or be reported or detected, as people spent more time at home and many businesses closed. In contrast, more time spent online during the pandemic may have presented increased opportunities for online crimes to take place.

Chart 1
Police-reported incidents of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, by year, Canada, 2014 to 2020

rate per 100,000



1. Includes sexual violations against children and other sexual offences where a victim was identified as being a person younger than 18.
 2. Total online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Defined as police-reported cybercrime incidents involving *Criminal Code* child-specific sexual offences, including child pornography, and other *Criminal Code* sexual offences where a victim was identified as being a person younger than 18.
Source(s): Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (3302).

The rise in the rate of online child sexual exploitation and abuse from 2019 to 2020 was largely driven by increases in the rates of both possessing or accessing child pornography (+33%), and making or distributing child pornography (+35%), as well as by a 22% increase in the rate of child luring offences. Child pornography incidents were the main drivers of change in the overall rate of online child sexual exploitation and abuse over the seven-year period from 2014 to 2020.

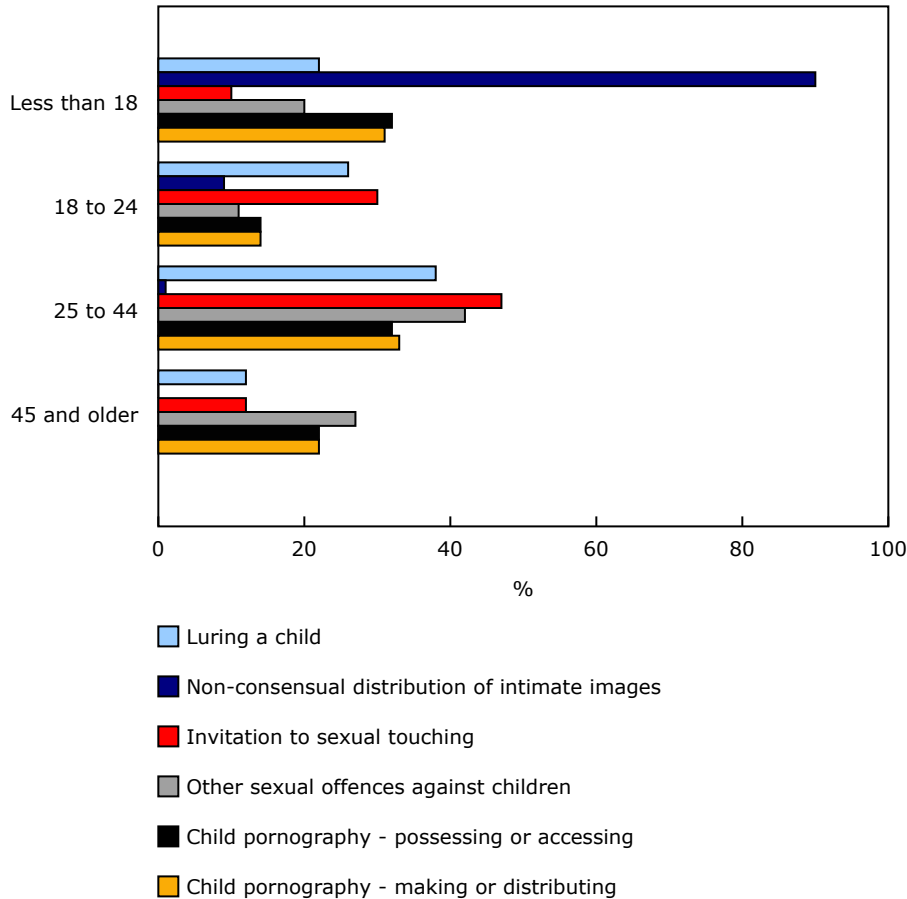
Three out of four victims are girls aged 12 to 17, and the majority of accused are men

Police-reported data indicate that online child sexual exploitation and abuse are gendered crimes that disproportionately impact girls. More than 7 in 10 child and youth victims (73%) were older girls aged 12 to 17, and 13% were girls younger than 12. Just over 1 in 10 victims (11%) were older boys aged 12 to 17, while boys younger than 12 accounted for 3% of all victims.

From 2014 to 2020, police services across Canada identified 9,766 accused people in incidents involving online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Close to half (49%) of the people identified in connection with these incidents were accused of child pornography. The vast majority (91%) of people accused of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (including child pornography) were men and boys: 35% of them were aged 25 to 44, 20% were 18 to 24 and 18% were 45 and older. Youth aged 12 to 17 accounted for 27% of the men and boys accused.

Chart 2

Persons accused in police-reported online child sexual exploitation and abuse incidents, by type of offence and age group, Canada, 2014 to 2020



Note(s): Children under 12 years of age cannot be prosecuted for criminal activities and, as such, are excluded. Also excludes accused persons where the gender was unknown. The category "other sexual offences against children" is a catch-all category that encompasses all sexual violations against children (excluding child pornography) which were facilitated by or involved the use of technology.

Source(s): Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (3302).

Non-consensual distribution of intimate images often involves peers

Overall, victims of online child sexual offences were most commonly victimized by a stranger (39%) or a casual acquaintance (25%). People close to the victims, such as friends (8%), family members (7%) or an intimate partner (7%), were less commonly identified as the accused in these incidents. However, the relationship of the accused person to the victim varied depending on the type of offence and the age of the victim.

For example, in the era of smart devices with built-in cameras and instant messaging capabilities, non-consensual distribution of intimate images is often perpetrated by the victims' peers. This offence commonly involves an accused person known to the victim. From 2014 to 2020, almost half (48%) of all youth victims of non-consensual distribution of intimate images were victimized by an intimate partner (28%) or a friend (21%), and for more than one-third (36%) of youth victims the accused was a casual acquaintance. Most victims of this crime (86%) were girls aged 12 to 17. Boys aged 12 to 17 accounted for 68% of the people accused of this crime, while 22% of the people accused were girls in this age range.

In contrast, incidents involving invitation to sexual touching were not often perpetrated by childhood peers, but rather by adults considerably older compared with the victims of this crime. More specifically, 6 in 10 (60%) people accused of this crime were aged 25 and older.

Few child pornography incidents are solved

More than half (56%) of online child sexual exploitation and abuse incidents where a victim was identified were not cleared, meaning that police were not able to identify an accused person in relation to the incident. In comparison, 15% of child pornography incidents were cleared, with more than 8 in 10 (85%) not cleared.

Additionally, child pornography incidents are less likely to result in charges. Specifically, more than 7 in 10 cleared incidents of online child sexual exploitation and abuse where a victim was identified (74%) resulted in the laying or recommendation of charges. In comparison, 64% of cleared child pornography incidents resulted in charges.

Invitation to sexual touching was most likely to be cleared (85%). When an accused was identified, charges were laid or recommended almost all of the time (96%). In contrast, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, which most often involved youth peers of the victim, was commonly (71%) cleared by means other than the laying or recommendation of charges, including by the accused being diverted from the formal criminal justice system through the use of warnings, cautions, and referrals to community programs and other diversionary programs.

More than one in three court charges for child sexual offences likely committed online result in a guilty finding

The Integrated Criminal Court Survey collects statistical information on court cases involving *Criminal Code* and other federal statute offences. According to the Integrated Criminal Court Survey, from 2014/2015 to 2019/2020, adult criminal and youth courts in Canada completed 27,522 charges related to child sexual offences that were likely committed or facilitated online. More than 8 in 10 (85%) of these charges were processed in adult courts.

Charges related to child sexual offences likely committed or facilitated online resulted in a guilty decision more often than charges involving other (likely offline) sexual violations against children. More than one in three court charges of child sexual offences likely committed online (36%) resulted in the accused being found guilty of the charge. In comparison, 29% of charges related to child sexual offences likely committed offline resulted in a guilty finding.

Note to readers

To measure crime in Canada, the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey, which collects data on activity that meets criminal thresholds as stipulated within the Criminal Code, is used. However, the Criminal Code does not have a specific definition for the broad crime of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Other tools available in the UCR Survey, however, can be used in conjunction with the Criminal Code definitions to identify criminal incidents that fall within the scope of this crime. Beginning in 2014, a cybercrime indicator was introduced in the UCR Survey to allow police services across Canada to report information related to crime that is committed or facilitated online.

In the UCR Survey, an incident is flagged as a cybercrime when the crime targets information and communications technology (ICT), or when ICT is used to commit the offence. To maintain consistency in measuring the cyber aspect of crime, analysis of cybercrime data is based on the most serious violation in the incident which was most likely to have involved ICT.

ICT includes, but is not limited to, the Internet, computers, servers, digital technology, digital telecommunications devices, phones and networks. Crimes committed over text and through messages using social media platforms are also considered cybercrime activity.

Incidents involving child pornography where an actual child victim was not identified are reported to the UCR Survey with the most serious violation being "child pornography." When an actual child victim is identified, the incident is reported to the UCR Survey with the most serious violation being sexual assault, sexual exploitation, or other sexual violations against children, and child pornography may be reported as a secondary violation.

The category "other sexual offences against children" is a catch-all category that encompasses all sexual violations against children (excluding child pornography), such as sexual interference, sexual exploitation or sexual assault, which were facilitated by or involved the use of technology.

Police-reported data for the years 2014 and 2015 exclude the municipal police services of Saint John, Québec and Calgary, as well as the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP). For the year 2016, the municipal police services of Saint John and Calgary, and the OPP were excluded. For the year 2017, the municipal police service of Saint John and the OPP were excluded. For the years 2018 to 2020, the municipal police service of Saint John was excluded.

The Criminal Code explicitly identifies the use of telecommunications for two offences relating to the sexual victimization of children: luring a child, and agreement or arrangement (sexual offence against a child). Additionally, according to police-reported data, large shares of child pornography (63%) and non-consensual distribution of intimate images (39%) offences are committed or facilitated online. Thus for analysis of court data, in this article, these four offence types are considered to be offences likely to be committed or facilitated online.

For the comparison with other child sexual offences that were likely committed offline, all sexual violations against children were grouped together excluding those likely committed online (luring a child, agreement or arrangement—sexual offence against a child, child pornography and non-consensual distribution of intimate images).

A completed charge refers to a formal accusation against an accused person or company involving a federal statute offence that was processed by the courts and received a final decision.

Throughout this article, calculations are based on unrounded figures and totals may not add up due to rounding.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [3302](#).

The article "[Online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Canada: A statistical profile of police-reported incidents and court charges, 2014 to 2020](#)" is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* ([85-002-X](#)).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).