

Police-reported online child sexual exploitation in Canada, 2014 to 2021

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Previously published data show that police-reported online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) is on the rise in Canada. This could reflect an actual increase in OCSE, in combination with greater awareness and reporting among the general population, as well as more police resources being allocated toward better detecting this type of crime. OCSE includes a wide range of criminal offences, including luring, invitation to sexual touching, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images involving victims aged 17 years and younger, and online child pornography (including child pornography generated using artificial intelligence).

The *Juristat* article released today, "[Online child sexual exploitation: Criminal justice outcomes of police-reported incidents in Canada, 2014 to 2021](#)," explores how police-reported OCSE incidents progress through the criminal justice system. Using a data file linking police-reported data with court data, this *Juristat* article examines the case characteristics and justice outcomes (that is, charges laid, court decisions and sentencing outcomes) of OCSE incidents reported by police from 2014 to 2021 that resulted in a completed court case from 2013/2014 to 2022/2023. Physical assault incidents involving victims aged 17 years and younger are used as a benchmark for comparison throughout.

Not all police-reported incidents of crime result in a completed criminal court case. Attrition—the phenomenon whereby some cases "drop out" and do not advance—happens at every stage of the criminal justice process. The attrition rate for police-reported OCSE incidents from 2014 to 2021 was high; the vast majority (92%) of incidents reported by police did not result in a completed court case.

An accused is identified in just under one-quarter of police-reported online child sexual exploitation incidents

From 2014 to 2021, police services in Canada reported 50,653 incidents of OCSE. Almost three in four of these incidents (72%) involved offences related to possessing, accessing, making or distributing child pornography online. The remaining 28% of incidents were online sexual offences against children (such as luring and invitation to sexual touching).

Just under one in four police-reported OCSE incidents (23%) were cleared (that is, solved) by police from 2014 to 2021, meaning that an accused had been identified in connection with the incident. Just over three-quarters (77%) of OCSE incidents did not involve the identification of an accused person, the highest point of attrition. Cybercrime investigations are becoming increasingly challenging, as perpetrators learn strategies to avoid detection and technology advances.

Once an accused was identified, just over two-thirds (69%) of OCSE incidents were cleared by charge, which resulted in the laying or recommendation of a charge against an accused. The remaining 31% of cleared incidents were "cleared otherwise," which means that an accused had been identified, but no charges were laid. An incident may be cleared otherwise for several reasons, including departmental discretion or diversion of the accused away from the criminal justice system into a formal diversionary program.

Just over half of online child sexual exploitation incidents in which charges are laid or recommended go to court

Of all police-reported OCSE incidents from 2014 to 2021 in which charges had been laid or recommended, just over half (53%) proceeded to court and resulted in a completed court case. It is not possible to determine whether the remaining incidents were still before the courts in 2023/2024 and beyond or whether they had dropped out entirely from the criminal justice system.

A court case can involve multiple charges if multiple violations were committed as part of the crime. However, not all linked cases processed in court reflect the initial charge laid by police. Charges can be downgraded to a lesser charge (for example, through plea bargaining) or can be changed by the Crown if more information about the case



becomes available after the police have completed their investigation. Analysis of court outcomes and sentences is limited to OCSE cases in which at least one OCSE charge was retained throughout the criminal court process (regardless of whether the OCSE charge was the most serious offence in the case).

The OCSE incidents that proceeded to court were linked to 12,479 completed court charges, as part of 3,100 completed court cases (in which at least one OCSE charge was retained).

Overall, three in four online child sexual exploitation cases completed in adult criminal court result in a finding of guilt

While a small proportion of OCSE incidents resulted in charges being laid or recommended by police and, subsequently, went to court, OCSE cases were more likely than physical assault cases to result in a guilty decision for any charge in the case.

From 2014 to 2022, almost three-quarters (72%) of adult criminal court cases linked to police-reported incidents of OCSE resulted in a guilty decision for the most serious offence in the case.

An additional one-quarter (25%) of cases were stayed, withdrawn, dismissed or discharged, and the remaining 2% of cases resulted in acquittals.

By comparison, just over half (52%) of physical assault cases resulted in a guilty decision.

Custody is the most common sentence for people found guilty in adult criminal court cases related to online child sexual exploitation

Once a person is found guilty of one or more charges in criminal court, they usually receive a sentence (such as being sentenced to custody or probation or given a fine). When there was a finding of guilt in a case with an OCSE charge retained, the vast majority (88%) of adult criminal court cases resulted in a sentence of custody. Meanwhile, 24% of physical assault cases with a guilty finding resulted in a sentence of custody.

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Note to readers

The Juristat article uses a data file that linked police-reported data from the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey with administrative data from the Integrated Criminal Court Survey (ICCS). Police-reported incidents after January 1, 2014, in which an accused person had been identified by police were considered in scope for the linkage with ICCS. This includes court cases that were completed up to the end of the fiscal year 2022/2023. Case counts include only cases in which at least one online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) charge was retained.

While the Criminal Code does not have a specific definition for the broad crime of OCSE, tools available in the UCR Survey can be used in conjunction with the Criminal Code definitions to identify criminal incidents that fall within the scope of this crime. The UCR Survey has a cybercrime indicator to allow police services across Canada to report information on crimes that are committed or facilitated online. An incident is flagged as a cybercrime when the crime targets information and communications technology or when information and communications technology is used to commit the offence. Information and communications technology 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. To maintain consistency in measuring the cyber aspect of crime, analysis of cybercrime data is based on the most serious violation in the incident that was most likely to involve information and communications technology, which is not always the most serious violation in the incident.

For ICCS data, the primary unit of count is the case. A case is defined as one or more charges against an accused person or company that were processed by the courts at the same time and received a final decision. A case combines all charges against the same person that have one or more key overlapping dates (date of offence, date of initiation, date of first appearance, date of decision or date of sentencing) into a single case.

A case that has more than one charge is represented by the charge with the "most serious offence." The most serious offence is selected using the following rules. First, court decisions are considered and the charge with the "most serious decision" is selected. Court decisions for each charge in a case are ranked from most to least serious as follows: 1) guilty; 2) guilty of a lesser offence; 3) acquitted; 4) stay of proceeding; 5) withdrawn, dismissed and discharged; 6) not criminally responsible; 7) other; 8) transfer of court jurisdiction. Second, in cases in which two or more charges result in the same most serious decision (e.g., guilty), Criminal Code sentences are considered.

Some incidents that were not successfully linked to a completed charge may still be before the courts, especially in recent years, when the linkage rates were noticeably lower. Further, recent years were likely affected by delays, closures and modifications to criminal court processes associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures. As the ICCS data include only completed charges and cases, those that are still active in the court system are not reflected in this linkage.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3302 and 3312.

The article "Online child sexual exploitation: Criminal justice outcomes of police-reported incidents in Canada, 2014 to 2021," is now available as part of the publication *Juristat* (85-002-X). The infographic "Online child sexual exploitation incidents in Canada: From the police to criminal courts" (11-627-M) is also released today.

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).