

Reports of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland have increased by 21 per cent

Reports of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland have increased by 21 per cent according to new data from Police Scotland.

Between 1 April, 2023 and 31 March, 2024, 2,055 cyber-enabled sexual crimes against children were recorded, an increase of 364 on the previous year. Three offence types accounted for two thirds of this total:

- Cause or coerce to see/hear sexual images/content
- Communicating indecently with a child
- Possession/distribution of indecent images of children.

The scale of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) was highlighted in a recent study by University of Edinburgh's Childlight initiative. It estimated that 300 million children a year worldwide were victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation.

And the National Crime Agency estimates that 1.3% – 1.6% of adults in the UK pose varying degrees of risk to children.

The scale of the threat is a recognised national risk.

Police Scotland today (1 July) launched its latest #GethelpOrGetCaught campaign to prevent OCSAE, targeting individuals who may already have offended or be at risk of offending.

It signposts them to the Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland's Stop It Now service which offers advice and support to prevent offending.

Detective Chief Superintendent Sam Faulds, head of Public Protection for Police Scotland, which leads on child protection, said:

"More of us live our lives online and that is particularly true for children and young people. Cyber-enabled crime is on the rise, and increasingly our investigations are focused online identifying offenders and bringing them to justice.

"During the school summer holidays, many more children will be at home and online.

"We want to reduce risk, to stop young people becoming victims of online child abuse and exploitation.

"Many of our key partners provide advice to young people and their parents about keeping safe online.

"Our role is to target offenders.

"Our prevention campaigns offer them a way to stop, a route out before they offend, before a child becomes their victim, before other lives are damaged.

"We want to prevent children becoming victims of online predators and we will use all means at our disposal to

identify offenders.

“Think about it – it might not be a child you are grooming or speaking to online. It might be the police. Take your chance to Get Help or you will Get Caught.”

Stuart Allardyce, director of Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland, said: “We have worked with hundreds of individuals who have either been arrested for online offences against children or are concerned about their thoughts or behaviours towards children.

“Through our work, we understand how difficult it is to reach out for help. We also know that those who engage in these behaviours often need support with their mental health and compulsive behaviours, feeling trapped in a cycle of harmful actions.

“The reasons for viewing sexual images of children or online grooming are complex, and many individuals recognise that what they are doing is wrong. Seeking individualised, anonymous, and non-judgmental support is absolutely the right step to take. This can help individuals stop viewing illegal images or engaging in illegal conversations online.

“By making the right choice and getting the support you need, you can move on from offending or potential criminal behaviour and help protect and keep children safe.”

The Police Scotland campaign will run for six weeks across various social media platforms including Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, and Spotify.

Last month, 61-year-old Ian Heddle, was convicted of the serious sexual assault of a child and possession of indecent images of children. Heddle was arrested and charged in Scotland in connection with possessing indecent images of children.

Following enquiries, it was established he had also sexually assaulted a young girl in Thailand. He was subsequently arrested and charged for this offence. The arrest was made under legislation which protects children anywhere in the world from sexual abuse by British nationals.

Earlier this year, serial predator, Benjamin Young, 42, was sentenced to 12 years in prison and has been given an Order of Lifelong Restriction (OLR). Young created and shared images and videos of the sexual abuse of children.

He was identified and investigated by the National Child Abuse Investigation Unit working with international law enforcement partners.

The majority of perpetrators of online sexual abuse are male (90%). Most victims are female (54%).