

Multi-million pound funding to protect child abuse victims and track down offenders

A £30 million funding boost will equip law enforcement with pioneering new tech and capabilities to track down more paedophiles operating online and safeguard children who have been abused, the government has announced today.

The additional investment to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) will help target the most dangerous and sophisticated offenders who operate on the dark web.

Statistics from the National Crime Agency (NCA) show that last year 2.88 million accounts were registered globally across the most harmful child sexual abuse dark web sites, with at least 5% believed to be registered in the UK.

To tackle this threat, further investment will be made in the UK's world-leading Child Abuse Image Database (CAID), a resource that provides law enforcement agencies with effective tools to search seized devices for indecent images of children, reducing the time taken to identify illegal images of children and increasing the ability to identify victims. The new funds being made available will explore adding enhanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to the system, including voice analytics and age estimation.

The government has also announced it will be co-hosting a major child sexual abuse summit in December in Africa to drive the international response.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

The internet has revolutionised the world by opening up society, facilitating the exchange of ideas, increasing the flow of goods and empowering people in a way many never thought possible. Yet while the internet can be an immeasurable force for good, it can also be used to provide a safe space for criminals.

That is why we are taking further steps to combat those who use the internet to prey upon children. Just as we're giving the police more resources and recruiting 20,000 more officers to keep our streets safe, we are also putting more money and the very best of our world-leading technical abilities into catching offenders operating in the dark web.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Vile predators who prowl the internet abusing children are cowards who need to be caught and punished. That's why it's essential we give our law enforcement agencies the support, resources and powers they need to bring them to justice.

This extra £30 million will help do this – ensuring online paedophiles are no longer able to hide in the shadows preying on our society's most vulnerable.

Fred Langford Deputy CEO and CTO at the IWF said:

We are delighted the government has committed more funding to fight the spread of child sexual abuse online.

Last year our analysts removed over 105,000 webpages from the clear web. Each page can contain thousands of individual indecent images of children. The IWF is the only non-governmental body with access to the Child Abuse Image Database. This collaboration is vital to ensuring that these images are prevented from being spread online and I am pleased to see that some of the funding has been allocated for further developments of that system.

Since 2016, the IWF has seen a rising trend in "commercial" hidden services, websites hosted within proxy networks (dark web), dedicated child sexual abuse websites offering child sexual abuse imagery for sale. In 2018, we identified 85 new hidden services, 47% of which were assessed as being commercial. We have also seen greater levels of encryption has made these services much harder to locate and it is clear that we have to keep pace with new offending behaviours.

The funding, announced as part of the Spending Round, will build on previous resource to tackle the complex issue of offending on the dark web. Previous funding has helped expand the NCA and GCHQ Joint Operations Team, while the NCA has also established its Dark Web Intelligence Unit- a team tasked with gathering intelligence and patterns on dark web offending.

Law enforcement have already had a number of successes with prosecuting criminals operating on the dark web. Kyle Fox, from Surrey, was jailed for 22 years in March after sexually assaulting a three-year-old on the dark web. The NCA launched an investigation and traced the suspect to his home in the UK. The suspect's face was not visible in the abuse videos, but investigators were able to use specialist capabilities to piece together clues, including clothing, to identify him and both victims. Last year Dr Matthew Falder pleaded guilty to 137 offences linked to the dark web.

CAID was first introduced to police forces from December 2014 and hosts 14 million images. It is a vital tool to speed up police investigations into CSEA and help safeguard the children who have been abused. State of the art new techniques being explored by the Home Office would see voice analytics

added to CAID to help detect offenders and safeguard victims, as well new age estimation tools.

This builds on new £1.76 million capabilities announced by the Home Office this summer to CAID, which included rolling out a new a fast-forensic tool, image categorisation algorithms and scene matching technology. AI tools like these can be used to identify and class images, speed up investigations and take the burden of viewing images off police officers.

The UK is looking to build on its status as a global leader in tackling child sexual abuse by hosting the WePROTECT Global Alliance summit with the African Union. The summit, to be held in Ethiopia, will bring senior leaders from 130 countries together alongside tech firms and civil society organisations to determine what efforts should be taken to tackle this global issue.

This builds on previous commitments to keep children safe online, including:

- the publication of the Online Harms White Paper, which includes proposals to compel tech firms to keep children safe online
- the Home Office will publish interim codes of practice, which will set out our expectations of tech companies in tackling online CSEA
- the Home Secretary hosted the 5 country ministerial in July, which set out joint actions to combat CSEA
- a commitment to publish a new national strategy to tackle all forms of child sexual abuse

Today, the Ministry of Justice has announced an expansion of the Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme, which will include adding in a number of sentencing changes for child abuse offenders.