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INHOPE Focus Group Summary

Grooming & Proactive Victim Protection INHOPE Focus Group 2022

Today's online environment poses a significant threat to the safety of children online more than ever. With the prominence of new technologies and platforms, children spending more time online and at home, the increase in recreational and educational screen time on digital devices (and private digital devices), there is the ease of accessibility to children for online groomers. This has provided more possibilities for offenders to create and share exploitative and abusive material.

The topic of discussion for INHOPE's 2022 focus group was "Grooming & Proactive Victim protection. We highlighted the global impact of grooming, the current trends around grooming activities and how these activities have changed over time. We explored preventative methods to keep young people safe online and what can be done to detect and deter online grooming.

With presentations from the European Commission, Dr. Michael Seto, Twitch, the Belgian Federal Police, and three engaging and highly interactive break-out sessions featuring Crisp, Patreon and Microsoft, the key topics of discussions takeaways are provided below.

A safe digital environment

June Lowery-Kingston from the European Commission opened the day with an engaging keynote speech on the EC's commitment to strengthen the fight against grooming through prevention and pro-active search and detection of abuse situations and grooming. She highlighted the EC's strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, the need to make the digital environment safer and the work being done to make platforms secure for children and young people.

This was followed by Samantha Woolfe, who set the scene by sharing key facts and statistics that examine the vulnerability of children online. When we look at how 94% of kids ages 3-18 years old have access to the internet, we need to understand that this is a wide range of ages and that this requires a wide range of understanding and education. We cannot assume that children are able can comprehend what grooming is and when it happens.

In today's online world, children cannot afford to be naive when an offender can contact them anonymously, using a fake identity or pretending to be the same age as the child. The only response is action. While the landscape is different, online and offline grooming is essentially the same as well as the psychology and goals of groomers. The goal of this Focus Group is to share insights, determine solutions and recognise that this is a societal issue, not an online issue.

The online sexual solicitation of minors

The strategic approach to tackling grooming was supported by the extensive research presented by Dr Michael Seto ([access slides](#)) who covered what grooming is, the types of solicitation, where it occurs, prevalence rates, and the fundamental need for action.

- **Online sexual solicitation is any kind of online interaction that is sexually motivated**, including requesting or sending child sexual exploitation material (CSEM), requests for live streaming, and planning to meet for sex.
- **Grooming implies a gradual strategy**; in online interactions, solicitation is often quite instant (i.e., spamming messages, threats of extortion), and so “grooming” is not always an appropriate term.
- **There are more ways for adults to interact with children than in past years because more children are online now and have private devices.**
- **Solicitation perpetrators are relatively more likely to commit sexual crimes again.**
- **The highest risk group for solicitation are girls aged 13-17.**
- **LGBTQ+ children are more likely to be solicited than cisgender children.**
- **Fantasy-driven solicitation focuses on online interactions, longer and more often.** Contact-driven solicitations focus on meeting in person and tend to be shorter and less frequent.

Understanding how grooming activities have changed

Now that we were equipped with the insights and information that Dr Michael Seto presented, participants then got involved in conversations on how to tackle grooming by joining breakout rooms. These sessions were led by room facilitators David Hunter from Crisp, Amanda Selby from Patreon and Catherine Garcia-van Hoogstraten from Microsoft. They considered the following questions to discuss the current trends around grooming activities and how these activities have changed over time.

1) **What methods are currently used to detect grooming activities on platforms? How do these compare to previous methods?**

- We have changed from patterns of behaviour to machine learning, which offers a richer solution that has been available so far and which will be more effective for the long term.
- User reporting remains important.
- Cooperation among platforms is key.
- Parents are presenting complaints for their children which tells us that parents might be more aware.
- A change around the way reports is made around law enforcement.

2) How do you effectively educate yourself on grooming and proactive protection online? What advice would you give to parents and guardians?

- Have an open line of communication with your child.
- Be as cautious as you would be offline. Teach your children to be as aware as they would be in face-to-face interactions. Parents should put themselves in their child's shoes and understand that technology is different now. Explain, teach, don't forbid. Know where your children are online and understand the platforms they're using. Information is widely available, but parents don't know where to look for it.
- Parents need to build trust with their children, so children feel safe discussing problems and incidents they encounter online. We should encourage children not to feel shame about these interactions.
- Try to be the person your child confides in when they are in trouble.
- Teach your child critical thinking skills and give them scenarios on what they would do in such a situation.
- Teach comprehensive and accurate sexual education at an appropriate age and by appropriate we mean not too early.
- It is unrealistic to think that our children will not come across inappropriate images on the Internet.

3) How can we improve/increase reporting of grooming activities on online platforms?

- Make reporting accessible. People need to be aware that such tooling exists and feel comfortable using it.
- Age and ID verification must be robust and conducted to a high standard.
- Improve education for children. They should be able to read rules and advice on reporting when signing up to a platform.
- Users want to feel like their reports will be dealt with by a human.
- Work on the complexities of options to report and terms being used.
- Automation tools need to be refined to catch keywords.
- The necessity of a reporting option at every touchpoint. A touchpoint is any point where two people, a minor and an adult, have the ability to talk to each other in a private space. This way if young people would realise and be given the opportunity to not continue the conversation if they did not feel safe enough to do so.
- Improve reporting to law enforcement.

4) How can we work together to tackle grooming activities on platforms?

- There must be targeted new technology. Technology companies need information from experts and NGO's to know where to target that technology.
- Interventions, such as Apple's nudity detector, are important. Giving children resources in the moment of risk could also be a powerful intervention.
- Online chats can go off-platform, so there is a strong need to be preventative and avoid such situations.
- We need to understand the vulnerabilities that lead children to interact with perpetrators and give them the tools to exit such interactions.

Feedback Panel

Following the breakout room sessions, we took our learnings into a panel discussion with the room facilitators. Their conclusions were:

Q1: What methods are currently used to detect grooming activities on platforms? How do these compare to previous methods?

- **There have been changes in the way reports are made to LEA so that victims feel more comfortable and less afraid of being treated as potential offenders themselves.**
- **Education for users on what to report, where, and how, has improved.**
- **Machine learning has become more effective.**
- **Platforms share information**, although this can present challenges.
- **AI is now employed frequently for detection.**
- How does end-to-end encryption affect this issue? From a technical perspective, this will create difficulties. These environments do already exist, and reports are not being made.

Q2: How do you effectively educate yourself on grooming and proactive protection online? What advice would you give to parents and guardians?

- **There is a need to discuss different behaviours**, such as sexting. Instructive versus restrictive guidance must be considered.
- **We need to identify when to provide this guidance and education.**
- **Prevention is an ongoing, trust-building process with children.** Parents also need education – they need to know what to look for, who their children are talking to, what platforms they use.
- **Platforms should have more visible ways to report abuse.**

Q3: How can we improve/increase reporting of grooming activities on online platforms?

- **Taking the preventative route of ID and age verification.** This takes some risk away by allowing a child's account to be private, preventing conversations with adults, etc.
- **Direct contact with Trust & Safety teams.**
- **Users want to feel like they can get a human response when they make a report** and that a response will be timely.
- **Education is always key because some children may not realise that an offence has occurred.**
- **There is an issue with commercial enterprises being reluctant to advertise reporting mechanisms.**

Q4: How can we work together to tackle grooming activities on platforms?

- **Working partnerships between stakeholders need to be more efficient** – relationships between LEA and NGOs, etc, are key.
- **We need to understand the capabilities of each potential stakeholder involved.**
- **Knowledge-sharing is key.** Educating children must be part of the approach. Platforms should share their knowledge with LEA and industry.
- **Reporting alone isn't enough** – education also needs investment.
- **Access to data and deep-dive research can help with prevention**, but this data is not always shared or easily accessible.

The two sides of grooming

After the feedback panels, we needed to understand the two sides of grooming. We have law enforcement on one end and platforms on the other. Grooming affects children both off and online thus there is a need for collaboration between industry and law enforcement. Therefore, we brought in speakers Jessica Marasa from the online platform Twitch and Yves Goethals from Belgian law enforcement to explain their perspectives on tackling grooming and why balance is needed on both sides.

The key takeaways were:

- Grooming is evolving because bad actors are constantly evolving.
- Twitch sees grooming as the first step - turning into sexualized dialogues. Predators are incredibly well versed. Leading children down the road to a sexualized conversation.
- Minors can feel very safe online. Many times, they are at home. They have this false sense of security that creates a different environment online.
- “If you close the doors, they come through the windows. If you close the windows, they come through the chimney”.

The last presentation was given by Yves Goethals from The Belgian Federal Police ([access slides](#)) on how to Prevent grooming to prevent victimization.

The key takeaways were:

- Offenders exchange expertise across different platforms both on the open net and darknet, including where to find CSAM and information on prosecution policies.
- Victims are not always aware that they are victims. They may not know they are being recorded online, for example.
- Recordings and images captured by offenders can be used to groom other children by fooling them into thinking they are interacting with another child.

- New social media platforms emerge frequently, making prevention a constant challenge and creating revictimization.
- LEA, non-LEA and industry must work together to identify grooming.
- Clear and uniform legislation must be in place to hold platforms accountable. There needs to be a balance between the right to privacy and crime-fighting.
- End-to-end encryption makes investigation difficult for LEA and gives protection to potential offenders.

Overall, the overlap was unanimous from both two sides on grooming, which is legislation not being clear or transparent enough. Yves mentioned that when legislation was implemented in regard to grooming, within six months they had a huge increase in reports that they didn't expect and that was all because of new legislation coming into place.

Redesign our response

For those whose intent is to exploit children, it's far easier today than it was 20 or 30 years ago. It's estimated that at least a quarter of teens have received explicit images they didn't ask for, and those are the kids who felt comfortable enough to admit it happened.

As one teen told Thorn during a focus group in 2019, here's how they respond: "...just try to ignore or block them, even changing [a] username if the offender is extremely persistent." -Thorn Focus Group

Through online grooming, predators can memorialize a child's decision in the most harmful way possible. When a predator does this, they're banking on fear of shame as discussed at the outset, and consequences to prolong the abuse and enable the production of additional content.

Thankfully, parents aren't alone in caring about their children's online safety. There is an ecosystem of support, from NGOs to law enforcement to tech companies and so many more, who are coming together to stand up and redesign our response to the sexual exploitation of children for the digital age. As a parent, all you need to do is keep trying and keep learning.

Children can try to ignore, block, to change their names online, but offenders are relentless and young people need a safer digital environment.

Let's come together to stand up and redesign our response to the sexual exploitation of children in the digital age.