

1. Met Police 'overwhelmed' by child sex

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abuse cases online

In a review of 34 online cases, 29 were assessed as either inadequate or requiring improvement, with 15 sent back to the force because the inspectorate considered they contained evidence of a serious problem. The inspection found that the processes for examining devices suspected of containing indecent images of children were ineffective.

The increasing use of social media platforms and channels to distribute, share and view child sexual abuse images poses a complex challenge for policing, according to the report. It said: "This is a national problem, requiring a co-ordinated response at a national level, including internet companies, to understand and exploit opportunities to reduce the access to, and availability of, such images."

Last year, Home Secretary Sajid Javid demanded tech companies step up their response to this issue, after he disclosed that the National Crime Agency had estimated that around 80,000 people in the UK present some kind of sexual threat to children online.

HMICFRS's findings on the Met are based on a post-inspection review carried out in 2018. In the latest assessment, an audit of 303 cases found that child protection practice was good in 93, required improvement in 127 and inadequate in 83. While fewer cases were judged inadequate than in previous inspections, HMICFRS said the results indicate that consistency of effective practice "remains weak". Opportunities to act quickly and decisively to protect children and prevent offending are still being missed, according to the report. It added: "We found that lack of supervision, along with the high workload of investigators, is contributing to drift and delays in investigations."

The inspectorate said it was told by the Met that it anticipates work to ensure children receive consistently improved responses will take a further two years.

"Senior leaders must assure themselves that this timescale is justifiable, given the extreme vulnerability of many of the children who come into contact with the force," the report said.

It also revealed that, in some areas of the capital, officers are managing more than 100 registered sex offenders each.

HMICFRS noted that the Met has made improvements since the 2016 inspection, resulting in "better and more effective oversight of child protection practices across the force".

The Met said the scale of child abuse and sexual exploitation offending online has grown in recent years, adding: "This increased demand on police, coupled with the need to keep up with advancement of technology and adapt our methods to detect and identify offenders, means it is a challenging area for the Met and police forces nationally."

"However, we are committed to addressing these challenges to improve our response in this area."

Commander Richard Smith, the Met's head of safeguarding, said: "We are pleased to see measurable improvement in our investigations since the last HMICFRS report was published. However, we know that we still have a lot more work to do before our child protection arrangements are consistently as effective as they should be."

Earlier this year, a BBC Radio 4 investigation revealed that images of child sexual abuse, along with drugs and stolen credit card data, are being openly traded on encrypted apps such as Telegram.

An unrelated NSPCC report, released around the same time, showed that child grooming cases on Instagram have tripled within 18 months, further heightening concerns about the sexual exploitation of children on social media platforms.

Link: <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2019/03/met-police-overwhelmed-by-child-sex-abuse-cases-online/>

E safety Update



2. Social media could be classed as 'addiction'

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under calls to protect children from harm

Addiction to social media should be classed as a disease and tougher regulations are needed to protect children from firms operating in an “online Wild West”, MPs have said. In a new report looking at the impact of social media on mental health, politicians say platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram should be regulated by Ofcom and forced to adhere to a statutory code of conduct. And MPs also called for a new Social Media Health Alliance to be set up to review the “growing evidence” on the impact of social media on health and wellbeing, funded by a 0.5 per cent levy on the profits of social media companies. The move to crack down on social media at Westminster comes just days after MSPs urged the Scottish Government to commission research on whether social media was linked to the “significant increase” in the numbers of children and teenagers suffering mental health problems. Holyrood’s public audit committee said the research was “required as an essential element of preventive action and early intervention”. Mental health referrals for children and young people have increased by 22 per cent over the past five years. The latest report by the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on social media and young people’s mental health and wellbeing says more needs to be done to tackle graphic online content, including suicide and self-harm. It also says the government must publish advice for young people about time spent online and research should be carried out into whether the “addictive” nature of social media should be officially classed as a disease by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The WHO already lists gaming disorder, such as addiction to video games, as a disease. And the APPG calls for the government to “establish a duty of care on all social media companies, with registered UK users aged 24 and under in the form of a statutory code of conduct, with Ofcom to act as regulator”. The code, which would establish rules around social media and known harms to young people – such as self-harm, disordered eating, low-self-esteem, lack of sleep and over-dependence on social media – should be in place by the end of October, the group said. Labour MP Chris Elmore, chairman of the APPG, said: “I truly think our report is the wake-up call needed to ensure – finally – that meaningful action is taken to lessen the negative impact social media is having on young people’s mental health. “For far too long social media companies have been allowed to operate in an online Wild West. “And it is in this lawless landscape that our children currently work and play online. This cannot continue.” The APPG said that while social media had the potential to positively impact young people’s lives, negative impacts include isolating mentally ill young people from accessing “real world” professional help, exposing them to online bullying and affecting self-esteem and body image.

Link: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/social-media-could-be-classed-as-addiction-under-calls-to-protect-children-from-harm-1-4890958>