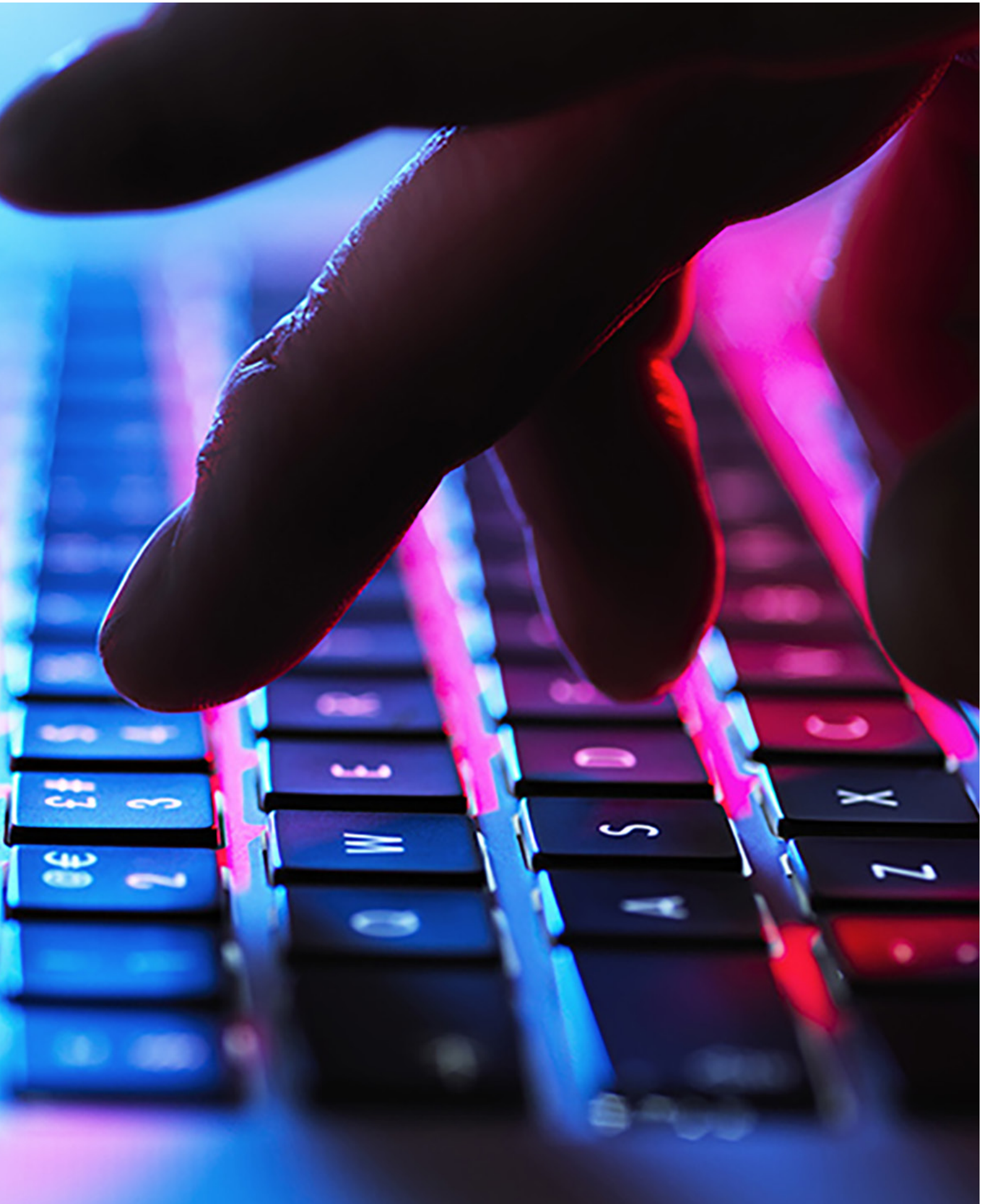


Finding Hope in the Battle to Curb the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents

By: Kathy Hatem



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Walk into a counselor's office with the goal of addressing a problem, and it's not uncommon to hear that the solution is often found by identifying the "root" of the problem.

In the United States and abroad, there is an epidemic of child sexual exploitation impacting the lives of untold millions. In fact, decades of government funding, policy, prevention-based programs and services have been allocated to combat and better ensure the safety of youth; yet, the problem continues to flourish. Perhaps, many of these well-intended efforts are missing the mark by turning a blind eye to the "root" of the issue – the role pornography plays as a fueling factor in child exploitation and abuse. "The viewing of obscene pornographic content is the primary gateway to the purchase of women and children being exploited and sold commercially for sex."

Once deemed "extreme," today's mainstream internet pornography depicts themes of torture, incest, racism and teen rape, among others. This content is prosecutable under U.S. federal obscenity laws which have been largely ignored for the past two decades. Yet, it's widely-accessible, often unavoidable, freely-available and heavily targeted and marketed for consumer use. Adults aren't the only ones accessing this extreme, deviant content. Our kids are getting caught up in this mess too! Children are increasingly becoming consumers. Children under the age of 10 now account for 22% of online porn consumption among those under the age of 18, while 10-14 year-olds make up 36% of minor consumers. Pornography is far from harmless.

It can become powerfully addictive and attempts to control or stop use altogether may prove to be difficult or unsuccessful. Studies examining the neuroimaging results of subjects who viewed internet por-

nography reveal brain region activation similar to craving and drug cue reactions for alcohol, cocaine, and nicotine (Behavioral Sciences, 2015). Viewing pornography may literally shrink the brain, as shared in a 2014 study in the journal JAMA Psychiatry. Men who regularly consumed pornography had smaller brain volume and fewer connections in the striatum—a brain region tied to reward processing—compared with those who didn't view pornography.

Pornography also feeds the appetites of child sex abusers, who often require more deviant content over time and can lead toward increased violence toward women. Further, the viewing of pornography can lead to the "normalization" of the content viewed, increasing the risk of sexually aggressive behavior and "acting out" what was seen upon others. In fact, the average age of first perpetration of sexual violence is 15-16 and is associated with exposure to pornography.

The sexual abuse of children and the multi-billion-dollar pornography industry, which profits from exploitative content, has close ties and is unquestionably interlinked with sex trafficking and sexual predation. Laura Lederer, former Senior Advisor on Trafficking in Persons for the U.S. State Department, once said, "Pornography is a brilliant social marketing campaign for commercial sexual exploitation." Her words couldn't ring more true.

Recent data offers an alarming scope of the issue:

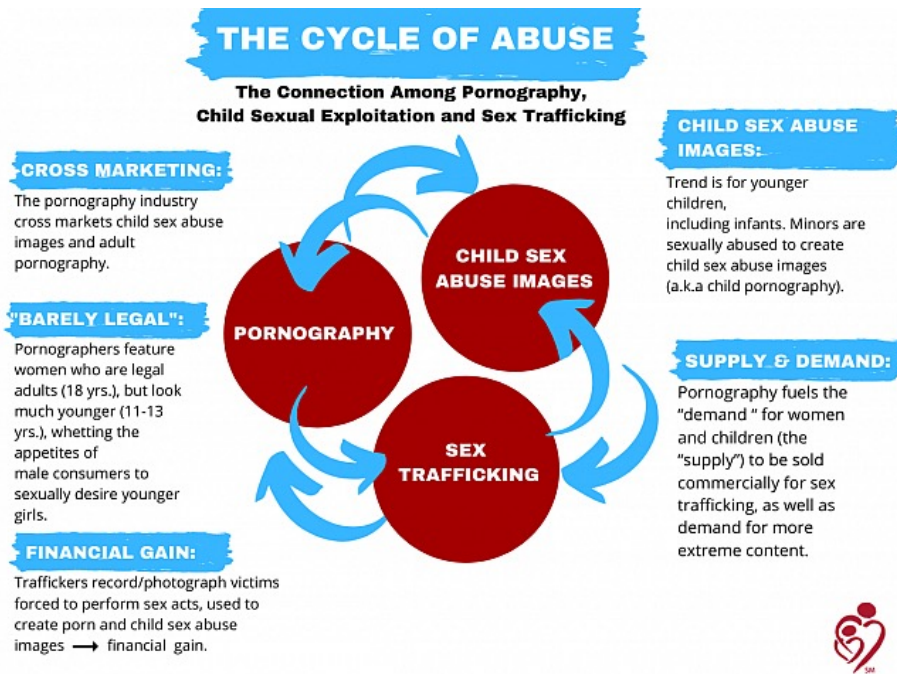
In 2021, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children received more than 29.3 million (up 35% over 2020) CyberTipline reports containing over 84.9 million images, videos, and other content related to suspected child sexual exploitation (up 29.8% over 2020). This content is referred to as "child sex-

ual abuse material," or CSAM, for short. These images and videos document victims' exploitation and abuse. Scarring and lifelong impact often result from the initial hands-on abuse, and tragically, the victims suffer re-victimization each time the image of their sexual abuse is shared across the internet or viewed. CSAM can be used and monetized by pedophiles as tools of sextortion, revenge pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation and shaming. Prior to the COVID pandemic, CSAM reports were already at a historic all-time high. Enter a global pandemic, and those reports escalated exponentially.

In fact, as soon as a world-wide lockdown became increasingly evident, the FBI warned parents that school closings due to COVID-19 presented a potential for increased risk of child exploitation as students would be spending more unsupervised time at home on computers. Child sex trafficking is a form of child abuse that occurs when a child under 18 is advertised, solicited or exploited through a commercial sex act. Traffickers are notorious master manipulators who prey upon a child's vulnerabilities to control and sexually exploit a child.

“Polaris, which operates the U.S. National Trafficking Hotline, reported a 40% increase in reports of sex trafficking crisis cases in the month following shelter in place orders. The situation was already grim prior to the pandemic; in 2018, over half (51.6%) of the criminal human trafficking cases active in the U.S. were sex trafficking cases involving children, and the internet was by far the most dominant business model sex traffickers used to solicit buyers of commercial sex and the most common method for luring victims, according to the U.S. Federal Human Trafficking Report.

“A passionate child safety advocate, Kathy Hatem has devoted her career to combating child exploitation and sex trafficking. Through her role as Director of Communications for Enough Is Enough, she oversees media and public outreach efforts, raising awareness among parents, corporate America and the government regarding internet threats impacting children.



children.

I am grateful that Enough Is Enough, a non-profit organization that has been fighting to make the internet safer for children and families since 1994 – and an industry pioneer into which I’ve dedicated a significant portion of my career, advocacy and expertise – continues to lead the call for the enforcement of U.S. federal obscenity laws. Yes, there are laws on the books (see 18 USC Ch. 71: OBSCENITY) that deem this vile content illegal and prosecutable, but that enforcement hasn’t happened in decades. Pornographers responsible for the online abuse of children have been knowingly breaking these laws all along and getting away with it, raking in

millions of dollars!

There is a way you can help stop this assault upon our children! Enough Is Enough has called on the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to aggressively enforce all existing laws designed to prevent the sexual exploitation of children, including obscenity laws. Right now, you can take action!

“To echo a recent request made by members of Congress, insist the White House, DOJ, Attorney General and State Attorneys General “declare the prosecution of obscene pornography a criminal justice priority”. Our children count on and deserve our protection.

These numbers paint a bleak picture. It’s undoubtedly difficult to fathom that children in the 21st century can continue to be exploited and their innocence shattered at such preposterous rates. They count on the grownups in this world to protect them, not harm them, after all!

But there is hope! We must not believe for a moment that continued exploitation of children is inevitable. Remember, pornography is the primary fueling factor that ignites a never-ending “cycle of abuse.”

In a nutshell,
the cycle looks like this:

The cycle of abuse is driven by the consumer’s appetite for more extreme and deviant types of pornographic content, which fuels the desire to act out those fantasies on

innocent children and vulnerable women, driving the demand for these victims to be sold commercially for sex. In turn, trafficked victims are further abused when the sex crimes against them are turned into pictures and videos, continuing the cycle.

Without the aggressive prosecution of obscenity, which fuels the pandemic of child sexual abuse material and sex trafficking violations, law enforcement will not be able to truly turn back the tide of sexual exploitation in the digital world.

Think about it: when we cut the problem (illegal, obscene pornography) at the “root,” that same imagery and content that drives demand for victims to be sold commercially for sex (sex trafficking) and leads to further abuse as sex crimes against children are turned into pictures and videos (CSAM) is no longer a viable, available source to exploit vulnerable, innocent

To sign the petition and for more information, please visit: Enough.org.
To learn more about the harms of pornography, visit InternetSafety101.org