



This submission contains descriptions of violence facilitated on social media platforms with the intent of informing the Australian Parliament about the urgent need for stronger policy action to protect the vulnerable from violence and to safeguard Australian society.

Reader discretion is advised.

Introduction

International Justice Mission (IJM) Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide comments to the Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society regarding the influence and impact of social media. Our comments will be with respect to issues “in relation to illegal or harmful content disseminated over social media, including scams, age-restricted material, child sexual abuse and violent extremist material.”

Alongside the many positive uses and impacts, digital technologies – and in particular, social media – have facilitated the rise of, and exposed Australian society to, new forms of exploitation and harmful content online. IJM’s comments will focus on two particular online harms, conducted over social media, and its impact on the victims, the offenders and wider society:

- 1) online sexual exploitation of children [livestreamed child sexual abuse]; and
- 2) online scamming.

IJM is a global organisation that protects people in poverty from violence, partnering with local authorities in 18 countries to combat slavery, violence against women and children, and other forms of abuse against people in poverty. IJM works with local authorities and governments to safeguard and restore survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and help strengthen public justice systems so they can better protect people from violence.

Since 2011, IJM has worked closely with the Philippine government, international law enforcement, community organisations and survivor leaders to combat the online sexual exploitation of children, with a focus on the trafficking of children to produce first-generation child sexual exploitation material (CSEM), especially via livestreamed video (“livestreamed child sexual abuse”) in video-chat applications.

Since 2021, IJM has helped local authorities remove, care for and/or support victim identification for over 350 individuals whom we believe to be victims of forced scamming within Southeast Asia’s scam compounds, where workers are trafficked and forced to scam Australians and other nationalities over social media, messaging and dating apps through romance cryptocurrency investment scams. IJM projects in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia proactively coordinate with their government agencies and foreign embassies to help facilitate rescues and repatriation of their national victims and connect with NGO partners to provide legal and psychosocial support.

Online Sexual Exploitation of Children

1. Use of social media platforms to facilitate livestreamed child sexual abuse

Livestreamed child sexual abuse is a particularly egregious form of online child sexual exploitation, in which adult offenders (“perpetrators”) pay traffickers or “facilitators” to commit hands-on sexual abuse of often young children while the offenders watch this abuse live online. The offenders do not merely watch passively; they actively direct the assaults and rapes of specific children by typing directives in the chat or audibly on the video call.

Social media facilitates both the organising and the carrying out of this crime. The arrangements for these sessions are made by the perpetrator and the facilitator communicating through regular social media channels, with payment being made through money remittance services (such as PayPal, Western Union etc.) The live abuse sessions are conducted through video-chat applications that are ordinarily used for video communication between friends and family or as work platforms.

Two recent studies have noted the use of mainstream social media platforms to facilitate child sexual abuse including a study by the Australian Institute for Criminology (AIC) which found that popular video call platforms such as Facebook Messenger and Skype have been used by Australian men to view the livestreamed sexual abuse of children in vulnerable countries (Napier, Teunissen & Boxall 2021a). A 2023 study from the UK’s University of Nottingham Rights Lab documented 30 cases beginning in 2010 involving UK offenders using platforms Microsoft Skype, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp to livestream child sexual abuse.¹

2. Nature and extent of the abuse / impact on victims

Livestreamed child sexual abuse contains some of the worst child sexual abuse acts and has a devastating impact on victims. Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) research on child sex abuse livestreaming reveals 98% of victims are 13 or under.² Forty percent of the livestream captures or recordings were classified by IWF as containing ‘serious’ sexual abuse, *with 18 percent involving the rape and sexual torture of children*. This is consistent with IJM’s on-the-ground casework experience in the Philippines.

In the 411 OSEC cases IJM has worked on, the livestreamed abuse suffered by children at the behest of Australian and other offenders who watch on video calls is rarely limited to erotic displays: it usually includes forcible sexual penetration constituting rape in most jurisdictions. Children are forced to engage in sex acts with other children, sexually abused by an adult, and sometimes harmed in other degrading ways, such as in bestiality. IJM social workers and lawyers have journeyed with hundreds of survivors as they pursued healing and justice from these traumatic harms perpetrated both in person and online.

¹ “Legal and institutional responses to the online sexual exploitation of children,” University of Nottingham Rights Lab, September 2023, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/beacons-of-excellence/rights-lab/resources/reports-and-briefings/2023/october/legal-and-institutional-responses-to-the-online-sexual-exploitation-of-children-the-united-kingdom-country-case-study.pdf>, page 10.

² See <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/iwf-research-on-child-sex-abuse-live-streaming-reveals-98-of-victims-are-13-or-under/>; Internet Watch Foundation 2018. Trends in child sexual exploitation: Examining the distribution of captures of livestreamed child sexual abuse. Cambridge, UK: Internet Watch Foundation. <https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/research>

Survivors have spoken out about the devastating impact of the abuse perpetuated against them with the following words:

"A lot of young people have been abused and many of them commit suicide because of what happened to them. It's not just mental health, it affects the child's background. It also affected their family life. We don't want children to experience this – especially our future children. Its effects are grave and our recovery was not easy."³

The profound impact of online harms on victims is highlighted in research by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC),⁴ which cites victim-survivors reporting psychological trauma, anxiety, fear, guilt, depression and self-harming or suicidal behaviour because of the abuse. They also reported shame, guilt, self-blame, trust issues, impaired relationships, and difficulties at school.

3. Impact on Australian society

The Philippines has been identified as the global hotspot for this type of abuse. A recent study conducted by IJM in partnership with the UK's Nottingham Rights Lab estimated that in 2022 alone nearly half a million Filipino children were trafficked to produce new child sexual exploitation material, including in livestreams.⁵

However, lest we think that livestreamed child sexual abuse only happens in the Global South, **Australian children** are also victims of child sexual abuse production and distribution via livestreaming. According to the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE):

Australian children *as young as eight* are being coerced into performing live-streamed sexual acts by online predators, who often record and share the videos on the dark net and sexually extort victims into producing even more graphic content.⁶

The reality of livestreamed child sexual abuse has profound implications for Australian society, whether the victims of the abuse are located in Australia or elsewhere.

Australian offenders driving demand

This form of online exploitation is fueled by demand from offenders around the world, especially Australia. According to the Anti-Money Laundering Council in the Philippines, Australia has consistently ranked the 3rd top source (behind the US and UK) of OSAEC⁷ payments flagged as “suspicious transactions” by financial institutions, both in terms of volume and PhP value over the reporting period 2015 - 2022.⁸ A study by the Australian

³ <https://www.ijmuk.org/stories/survivor-letter-to-uk-government-online-safety-bill>

⁴ AIC, Crime and justice research 2022, “Production and distribution of child sexual abuse material by parental figures” https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/ti616_production_and_distribution_of_child_sexual_abuse_material_by_parental_figures.pdf

⁵ IJM (2023), *Scale of Harm: Estimating the prevalence of trafficking to produce child sexual exploitation material in the Philippines* <https://www.ijm.org.ph/resources>

⁶ AFP warn about fast growing online child abuse trend, Sept. 2021,

<https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/afp-warn-about-fast-growing-online-child-abuse-trend>

⁷ OSAEC – Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children

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<http://www.amlc.gov.ph/images/PDFs/Main/Online%20Sexual%20Abuse%20and%20Exploitation%20of%20Children%20in%20the%20Philippines.pdf>

Institute of Criminology (AIC) found that 256 Australians spent AUD\$1.3 million to view live streamed child sexual abuse of Filipino children over a 13-year period.⁹

Recent research by Childlight¹⁰ on the global scale and prevalence of child sexual exploitation and abuse found that 11% of men in the United States, 7% of men in the UK and **7.5% of men in Australia** report that they have engaged in online behaviours at some point in their lifetime that could be classed as online child sexual abuse offending. At a greater level of granularity, the study found that **1.7% of Australian adult men** have paid for online sexual interactions, images or videos involving a person under 18, and **1.8% of Australian adult men** have engaged in sexually explicit webcamming with a child.

Connections between online and offline offending

Recent research by the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#)¹¹ reveals important connections between online sexual exploitation of children and contact offending, which is different from viewing other forms of CSAM.

[V]iewing CSA live streaming is different to viewing CSAM. Wortley and Smallbone (2012) suggest that individuals who sexually offend against a child must first cross a psychological threshold. Arguably, CSA live streaming offenders have already done this, by directing and watching the live sexual abuse of a child online—which is on par with abusing the children themselves. This may partly explain why some CSA live streaming offenders in the current study attempted to travel to offend against children in person.

A study by Finnish-based NGO [Protect Children](#)¹² found that 40% of CSAM offenders report having sought contact with a child after viewing the material.¹³

This research indicates that there is a direct link between online offending and contact offending. Adults who engage in social media-enabled online child sexual abuse via video-chat applications are prone to attempt in-person sexual abuse of other children, putting children in their communities and elsewhere at risk.

Pathway to further offending and re-offending

Livestreamed child sexual abuse contributes to the cesspool of CSAM available on the internet, as offenders often capture the livestream and share files with other offenders. This in turn increases the risk of exposure of Australians to harmful content online that could lead them down the pathway to child sexual abuse offending, or re-offending.

Michael Sheath, principal practitioner at the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and a counsellor with 33 years of experience working with men who abuse children, has found a link between the extreme nature of internet pornography and deviant or criminal behaviour. Speaking to the Guardian about the men he has worked with, he said:

⁹ Brown R, Napier S & Smith R 2020. "Australians who view live streaming of child sexual abuse: an analysis of financial transactions." Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice no. 589. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-05/ti589_australians_who_view_live_streaming_of_child_sexual_abuse.pdf

¹⁰ Childlight (2024), *Into the Light: Childlight global index of child sexual exploitation and abuse prevalence*. <https://childlight.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/into-the-light.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/ti671_overlap_between_csa_live_streaming_contact_abuse_and_other_child_exploitation.pdf

¹² <https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/post/redirection-blog04-not-just-viewers>

¹³ Tech Platforms Used by Online Child Sexual Abuse Offenders, Research Report with Actionable Recommendations for the Tech Industry, *Protect Children*, February 2024.

“...mainstream pornography sites are changing the thresholds of what is normal and I think it’s dangerous [...] If you look at the videos on mainstream porn sites you can see ‘teen’ themes, ‘mom and son’ themes, lots of incestuous porn. It’s pretty deviant stuff. To watch this you have already lowered your threshold of what is acceptable. Porn is an entry drug for a lot of them.¹⁴

4. Policy Implications

Livestreamed child sexual abuse causes serious and long-term physical, psychological and financial damage to the victims, their families, to those who consume or are exposed to the resulting child sexual abuse material, and more generally on Australian society and economy. A number of policy implications arise from this reality:

- 1) The digital environment is enabling the production, distribution and storage of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), including livestreamed child sexual abuse. It is incumbent upon social media platforms to exercise a duty of care for ensuring that online child sexual abuse is not taking place on their services. They should be required to prevent and disrupt any child sexual abuse being committed on their platforms; detect and remove CSAM being hosted or distributed on their platforms; and invest on an ongoing basis, to developing systems, processes and technological tools to better detect and prevent online child sexual abuse from happening on their platforms. For further specific recommendations, please see IJM’s submissions on the *Online Safety Act 2021*¹⁵.
- 2) Robust enforcement of criminal laws, and the expectation that engaging in livestreamed or other forms of online child sexual abuse results in being caught and punished, will have a deterrent effect. Please see IJM’s submission on Law Enforcement Capacity with respect to Child Exploitation.¹⁶

Online Scams

5. Online scamming fuelled and facilitated by social media platforms

Over the past decade, Southeast Asia has become a major breeding ground for sophisticated transnational criminal networks. During the pandemic, criminal syndicates moved their scamming operations into casinos that were emptied due to travel restrictions to expand their operations. These syndicates target millions of victims around the world, including Australians, with illegal and unregulated online gambling and sophisticated scamming operations.

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) estimates the amount of funds stolen by scamming worldwide as of the end of 2023 to be AUD \$96 billion, and estimates the scamming industry is worth AUD \$18.9 billion a year in Cambodia alone –half of that country’s formal GDP.²⁴

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse>

¹⁵ <https://ijm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Online-Safety-Act-Review.pdf>

¹⁶

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Law_Enforcement/ChildExploitation47th/Submissions

Digital technology, including social media, is increasingly being used by criminal syndicates to:

- 1) *Recruit a labour force to run large scale, complex operations aimed at scamming people across the world, including Australia, out of Southeast Asia.*

An alarming trend in recent years has been the rise of online scamming operations, primarily in Southeast Asia, whereby traffickers recruit victims through deceitful online job listings, confine them in gated compounds and force them to engage in online criminal activity under threat of serious harm.

The scamming industry comprises a mix of voluntary and coerced workers who have been forced into criminality through human trafficking and are subjected to abhorrent abuse and forced labour slavery by criminal syndicates.

Victims of forced criminality are often tricked by false job advertisements posted on social media sites. They are forced to scam for 12 to 20 hours a day, six days a week, often with just a few hours' sleep. If scam workers do not meet the 'target' they are set or try to escape from the compound, they are starved, electrocuted, or beaten. In some cases, if they want to leave the compound, they are told that they must recruit at least two people or pay thousands of dollars for their release in ransom for their release. Some workers have been sold to other scam centers.

According to a 2023 report by Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), over 220,000 people are engaged in online scamming in Cambodia and Myanmar from more than 40 countries,¹⁷ whilst USIP estimates an additional 85,000 are held in Laos²⁴. In the Mekong region as a whole, at least 300,000 people are estimated to be engaged in the scamming industry²⁴, which is rife with allegations of labour trafficking and abuse.

- 2) *Facilitate scams by using platforms to identify scam targets and then gain trust and information from potential victims, including via romance cryptocurrency investment scams, or 'pig butchering'.*

IJM estimates **romance cryptocurrency investment scams** are the largest type that powered by modern slavery from scam compounds in Southeast Asia. A remote third party, who is often painted as beautiful and successful, but is in reality likely to be a victim of forced criminality and held against their will inside a scam compound, reaches out to an Australian via a **dating app or a 'missed connection' message**.

If the Australian engages the scammer moves the conversation over to an **end-to-end encrypted messaging platform** and introduces cryptocurrency investment into the chat. The scammer convinces the target to invest in a crypto trading platform where they've had personal success, guides the target through a series of screen shots as to how to invest to make a return, and at this point siphons the investment into a scam account, which appears to be part of the legitimate crypto exchange.

¹⁷ <https://bangkok.ohchr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ONLINE-SCAM-OPERATIONS-2582023.pdf>

6. Impact on Australian society

According to the National Anti-Scam Centre (NASC), Australians lost \$3.1 billion to scams, including \$210.2 million to romance scams in 2022¹⁸. In 2023, Australians lost \$2.7 billion to scams, including \$201.1 million to romance scams in 2023¹⁹.

Despite the welcome downward trend following the commencement of the NASC and increasing action from Australian banks, scams remain a serious threat to Australian society, including romance cryptocurrency investment scams, which emanate predominantly from scam compounds in Southeast Asia, powered by slave labour.

Effectively addressing the threat of online scams requires not just a defensive approach from within Australia's borders, but a proactive national security approach that targets criminal impunity in Southeast Asia's organised criminal syndicates.

7. Policy Implications

The trafficking of people into forced criminality, which is significantly powering the online scamming workforce, is a global crime that requires an urgent global response.

Governments, financial institutions, telcos and social media platforms must collaborate closely to stem the tremendous spread of this transnational crime, which is resulting from governance failure and is leading to significant legal and reputational risks for corporations operating in the above sectors.

IJM believes that criminal accountability for online scamming operators is essential, and we are working with government agencies to eradicate this form of violent and financial crime across Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.

IJM is committed to developing the capacity of local justice system actors to prosecute recruiters and operators of online scam centres who are using trafficked people to fuel their operations. IJM also proactively coordinates with local government agencies and diplomatic missions to help facilitate rescues and repatriation of victims of forced scamming and connect with government and non-government partners to provide them with legal and psychosocial support.

The Australian Government should:

- 1) Continue to invest in programs, like the Bali Process, ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, and the Mekong-Australia Partnership, to work collaboratively with international law enforcement, Southeast Asian governments, the private sector and NGOs to combat online scamming at its source – criminal syndicates operating scamming compounds across Southeast Asia.
- 2) Advocate for social media platforms to recognise that they are inadvertently enabling this criminal industry and encourage them to use internal tools to disrupt and prevent the further growth of online scamming. Government efforts will not be successful without strong support from the private sector. For example, government

¹⁸ <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Targeting%20scams%202022.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/targeting-scams-report-activity-2023.pdf>

should require social media platforms to proactively identify and take down fraudulent ads, identify and ban harmful content and users, and support targeted awareness raising in high-risk forums.

Conclusion

Social media has largely evolved without significant government regulation, which has led to the rapid expansion of its multifaceted reach and influence into the lives of Australians. Whilst this has come with many benefits, social media is increasingly being weaponised by those who seek to misuse this technology to sexually exploit children online, and to facilitate online scams.

IJM urges the Australian Parliament to consider the impacts of social media as it relates to the safety of children in Australia and overseas from online sexual exploitation, and the safety of Australians who are falling prey to online scams facilitated by social media.

Should the Committee wish to discuss IJM's recommendations to counter online sexual exploitation of children and online scams, please contact IJM Australia CEO, David Braga, at dbraga@ijm.org.au or 1300 045 669 and IJM Australia Chief Advocacy Officer, Grace Wong, at gwong@ijm.org.au.