

NCA and police arrest 130 suspects for child sexual abuse and exploitation in just one week

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More than 130 suspects – including a former police officer and five teachers – were arrested in a crackdown on online child sex offenders – as UK law enforcement today asks the tech industry to increase their help eradicating preventable offending.

The suspects were arrested in a joint operation by the National Crime Agency (NCA) and forces in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

During the recent week of action, 225 warrants were executed, 164 children safeguarded, and 131 arrests made for offences relating to indecent images of children.

Of the arrests, 13 were registered sex offenders and 19 held positions of trust, with a children's entertainer, an ex-police officer and two special constables arrested.

The NCA received 82,109 individual industry referrals for child sex abuse images in 2017 - a 700% increase since 2012.

In 2014 the NCA made just over 1,600 CSAE disseminations to forces. In 2017 the number rose to nearly 10,000.

In co-ordinated activity by the NCA and police, around 400 people are arrested in the UK every month for CSAE offences and more than 500 children are safeguarded every month, compared with 417 arrests in response to disseminations by the then CEOP Centre in 2009/10. However, this is only one part of the problem.

The NCA is seeing an increase in hidden or encrypted online opportunities for higher risk offending.

End-to-end encryption and increased anonymity on the internet are progressively becoming standard.

Offenders can use the dark web to groom and harm children on the mainstream internet.

For example, in February this year Dr Matthew Falder, a university postdoctoral researcher, was jailed for 32 years after admitting 137 offences relating to sadistic 'hurt core' material located on the dark web.

Every time an indecent image is shared the victim is retraumatised. Officers are currently spending a significant amount of time investigating offending by criminals who have possessed or shared known indecent images – these are images that could be taken out of circulation with increased help from technology companies.

Law enforcement needs to be able to proactively target the highest risk, hardest to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation offenders, using covert and specialist assets as

increasingly required and focusing on areas where there is a greater risk of contact abuse such as grooming and live-streaming, and high-risk offenders such as Falder.

Today, the NCA and NPCC are asking industry to work with law enforcement to prevent the proliferation of indecent images of children on the internet.

The NCA's lead for tackling child sexual abuse, Director Rob Jones, said: "We are seeing an increase in the number of sophisticated offenders using the dark web to groom and harm children on the mainstream internet.

"Law enforcement prioritises these investigations to safeguard vulnerable children and prosecute offenders.

"But investigators still have to deal with significant numbers of offenders committing preventable crimes such as viewing and sharing indecent images and videos known to law enforcement.

"The technology exists for industry to design-out these offences, to stop these images being shared. Whilst some online platforms have taken important steps to improve safety, we are asking them to take it to the next step; to innovate, to use their brightest minds, and to invest in preventing these online offences from happening in the first place.

"That would significantly reduce the trauma to the victims whose images are shared, prevent other individuals from developing a sexual interest in children through accessing these images, and disrupt the methods used to access them.

"Securing agreement from industry to do this would represent a monumental landmark in protecting children."

National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, Chief Constable Simon Bailey, said:

"The police response to tackling child abuse online has been robust but there is a growing need to pursue offenders who pose the most harm to children and are using sophisticated technology to evade detection.

"Technology plays a significant part in all online investigations and there is an expectation that technology companies acknowledge their social responsibility in preventing and designing out this type of offending from their platforms.

"Only by working collaboratively with technology companies and law enforcement partners will we be able to minimise the risk posed to children online by predatory offenders."