

# COVID Lockdown and Online Harms

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## Executive summary

CCC COVID Briefing Papers are an ongoing series of short-form, open access reports aimed at academics, policymakers, and practitioners, which aim to provide an accessible summary of our ongoing research into the effects which the coronavirus pandemic (and government responses) are having on cybercrime.

In this report, we respond to speculation about the increased potential for harm to young people as a result of the move to online socialising and learning during lockdown. Local authorities have a statutory duty to allow anyone with a safeguarding concern regarding a child to disclose that concern, and to record these disclosures. We made Freedom of Information requests to all local authorities in England and Wales and 60 gave us useful data for the period from the start of the year to the start of June. We find there was a reduction in safeguarding referrals during the lockdown period. However, local authorities have no duty to record if referrals were for ‘online abuse’, so any increase of online abuse during lockdown is very difficult to determine.

## Are young people more at risk from online harm during lockdown?

Since the COVID-19 lockdown there has been much speculation in the press [2, 4] and public discourse [3, 6] about the risks to young people from spending more time indoors using digital technology. This speculation might seem to be fairly measured; young people spending more time online might well result in a greater likelihood of being exposed to online harms. However, there can be a lack of rigour and critical analysis in the reporting of online safeguarding incidents (e.g. [1, 5]), and we argue that the evidence for these assumptions ought to be robustly assessed.

Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities have a legal duty to provide the means for members of the public or professionals working with young people, to disclose a concern regarding a child’s welfare. This is called a *safeguarding referral*. Local authorities have a statutory duty to record all safeguarding referrals, the nature of the referral, and by whom it was made. We made Freedom of Information requests for these data to all local authorities in England and Wales on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020. Additionally, focusing on online harms during lockdown, we requested information on how many referrals were specifically related to online abuse.

To date, 70 local authorities have responded and the findings presented here are based from the 60 who provided usable data. In total, this comprises information on 144 835 referrals from all stakeholders.

## Results from the Freedom of Information requests – Question 1

We asked: “*Please can you provide the number of child safeguarding referrals you have received, per week, per referrer (school, police, healthcare, private citizen, other) from WC 6/1/2020 to WC 7/6/2020?*”

As per the request, referrals were reported on a weekly basis from the start of the year to the start of June, allowing us a reasonable comparison between pre- and post-lockdown referral rates. In this top-level reporting, we can state that there was no evidence to indicate that safeguarding referrals, in general, had increased over the lockdown period. Comparing weekly averages pre-lockdown with the same measure post-lockdown, we found that of the 60 authorities analysed, 56 showed a decrease in the average number

of referrals per week during lockdown. Across the whole population, local authorities saw on average approximately 25% fewer safeguarding referrals during the lockdown period.

While some reduction might be expected in safeguarding referrals overall, one traditional source of safeguarding referrals – schools – were closed during lockdown. Pre-lockdown, safeguarding referrals from schools accounted for less than 20% of referrals. While referrals from schools did decrease during lockdown, they did not cease entirely, as schools were still engaged with students during the lockdown period. Taken together with the decreased overall figures for referrals, this suggests that there is little evidence for an increase in safeguarding concern for young people during the lockdown period.

## Results from the Freedom of Information requests – Question 2

We asked: “If possible, please can you provide the number of child safeguarding referrals you have received, per week, per referrer (school, police, healthcare, private citizen, other) from WC 6/1/2020 to WC 7/6/2020, where the safeguarding concern refers to online abuse?”

The majority of responses reported that the data requested was not recorded. As one local authority replied: “We have no statutory expectation from the Department for Education to hold this information”.

Of 60 local authorities, only 6 disclosed details on safeguarding referrals related to online abuse. For 5 of these authorities, online abuse disclosures counted for less than 1% of overall disclosures. For the remaining local authority, online abuse referrals comprised approximately 10% of all referrals but their data showed a slight drop in this type of referral during the lockdown period.

## Conclusions

Our analysis of safeguarding referral data shows no evidence that young people have been at greater risk from online harms during the lockdown. The vast majority of local authorities report a reduction in safeguarding referrals overall during the lockdown period. Furthermore, there is little meaningful data held that might indicate any increase in safeguarding referrals related to online abuse, as there is no legal expectation for local authorities to hold this data. From what data we received, there is nothing at all to indicate a increase in online abuse during the lockdown – highlighting, once again, that popular conjecture about online risk is often not borne out in the analysis of actual data.

- [1] Maria Bada and Richard Clayton. “Online suicide games: a form of digital self-harm or a myth?” In: *Annual Review of Cybertherapy and Telemedicine (ARCTT)* (2020).
- [2] BBC. *Coronavirus: Fears over online grooming of children in lockdown*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52999552>. June 2020.
- [3] Europol. *Exploiting isolation: Sexual Predators increasingly targeting children during COVID pandemic*. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/exploiting-isolation-sexual-predators-increasingly-targeting-children-during-covid-pandemic>. June 2020.
- [4] Jamie Grierson. *Coronavirus lockdown raises risk of online child abuse, charity says*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/02/coronavirus-lockdown-raises-risk-of-online-child-abuse-charity-says>. Apr. 2020.
- [5] SWGfL. *Exploiting isolation: Sexual Predators increasingly targeting children during COVID pandemic*. <https://swgfl.org.uk/research/digital-ghost-stories-impact-risks-and-reasons/>. 2020.
- [6] UNICEF. *Children at increased risk of harm online during global COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/children-at-increased-risk-of-harm-online-during-global-covid-19-pandemic/>. Apr. 2020.

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At the Cambridge Cybercrime Centre we make our research data available to other academics, sometimes before we have looked at it ourselves! Researchers can be provided access to our ‘CrimeBB’ dataset of (26 and counting) underground cybercrime forums, our extensive collections of chat channel data, and our new collections of forums relating to online right-wing extremism and radicalisation. We can also share email spam and sensor data related to DDoS and IoT malware. All these collections are regularly updated and can be rapidly provided under licence – for full details see: <https://cambridgecybercrime.uk>

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