



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3000

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG

June 6, 2023

Dear Senator/Representative:

Thank you for your attention to the protection of children online. As pastors, we have seen the destructive effects of the reprehensible offenses of child exploitation firsthand. And as leaders of an institution that, for many years, failed to meet its responsibility to protect all children, we know all too well the consequences of a culture that fails to give adequate attention to the problem of child sexual exploitation. While the exploitation of children has always been a problem, in recent years, it has increased exponentially, in large part due to the Internet and mobile technology. Online child exploitation threatens the safety and well-being of our young people and destroys families and communities. The ability of a child to grow into adulthood in peace and security is both a human right and a demand of the common good: the dignity of the human person requires protections for our young people so that they may flourish as they mature. We write to bring to your attention some of our concerns.

Online child exploitation occurs in many forms, from the creation and distribution of child pornography to the inducement to engage in dangerous and self-destructive activities. Often, children are targeted due to their immaturity, using their precious innocence to manipulate and harm them. But children are also exploited simply because the Internet contains a multitude of materials that are not intended for child consumption but are nevertheless easily available. Children often accidentally encounter pornography, depictions of extreme violence, and other destructive media that is harmful to young people. A child may search online for a term he or she heard and did not understand, or intentionally search for inappropriate media out of curiosity.¹ The lack of adequate safeguards on many Internet websites makes this early exposure to sexual and violent materials far too common.

In light of these considerations, we ask you to keep in mind the following longstanding moral principles as you discern how to address the protection of children online:

1. **Respect for life and dignity:** In an address last year, Pope Francis said that pornography must “be condemned as an attack on the dignity of men and women.”² In our current culture, we cannot hope to eliminate pornography on the Internet, but legislation should, at the very least, implement adequate safeguards to ensure it causes minimum harm. No one should be coerced into participating in the creation of

¹ Chiara Sabina et. al., “The nature and dynamics of Internet pornography exposure for youth,”; L.M. Jones, K.J. Mitchell, and D. Filkelhor, “Trends in youth Internet victimization: Findings from three youth Internet safety surveys 2000-2010,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 50 (2012): 179-186.

² Pope Francis, Address to Directors of the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (June 10, 2022).

pornographic materials,³ and victims should be empowered to ensure that unlawfully created pornography is removed from Internet platforms.

Because each human life is a uniquely precious gift from God, every person should be given the opportunity to mature to adulthood in safety and security. Young people born in the digital age have grown up immersed in media and the Internet and often are savvier at navigating this world than their parents.⁴ A recent study found that 15% of children report having first viewed online pornography (either accidentally or intentionally) when they were 10 years old or younger, and a majority report having viewed it by the time they are 13 years old.⁵ Being exposed to pornography can be traumatic for children and youth. Seeing it steals their innocence and gives them a distorted image of sexuality, relationships, and men and women, which may then affect their behavior, including addiction to pornography. Because children lack mature understanding of appropriate behavior, pornography makes them more susceptible to victimization by sexual abuse and maltreatment.

Even more tragically, children and youth are also victimized by being coerced into participating in the production of child pornography. Child pornography is illegal, abusive, and a form of human trafficking because of a child's inability to consent. Despite the efforts of caring parents, modern technology has created an open Internet landscape fraught with peril for children. There is an immediate need for effective safeguards to ensure children cannot access inappropriate online media. Likewise, law enforcement agencies and child-serving professionals with the ability to identify and remove child pornography from the Internet must be provided the necessary resources to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

2. **The call to family:** In his 2014 Lenten message, Pope Francis noted, “How much pain is caused in families because one of their members—often a young person—is in thrall to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography!”⁶ Parents today face increasing challenges in protecting their children's innocence. Legislation should respect the family as the central social institution of society and buttress the authority and ability of parents to protect their children online, by ensuring that they have the tools necessary to monitor their children's online activity. It should also seek the common good and well-being of all, especially those who are vulnerable.

³ The U.S. Department of Justice has prosecuted numerous cases against pornographers who fraudulently coerced vulnerable children and adults to appear in pornographic videos. See, e.g., Press Release, “Cameraman Pleads Guilty in GirlsDoPorn Sex Trafficking Conspiracy,” Department of Justice (January 21, 2021).

⁴ Kleponis, *Integrity Restored*, 116, citing “Pornography Statistics,” *Family Safe Media* (2010). See also Chiara Sabina et. al., “The nature and dynamics of Internet pornography exposure for youth,” *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 11 (2008): 691-693.

⁵ Robb, M.B. & Mann, S., “Teens and pornography,” *Common Sense* 11 (2023).

⁶ Pope Francis, Lenten Message for 2014 (December 26, 2013).

3. **The call to community and participation:** The person is both sacred and social. Social media has introduced new forms of communication and allowed for greater sharing of information, but online networks should not undermine local communities, which are naturally formed by the desire to seek companionship with others. By providing tools to those who abuse the natural human tendency to seek love and support from others, digital platforms distort perceptions of social roles and responsibilities to oneself and the community. The result is the emergence of new forms of abuse and extortion, with online predators inducing vulnerable people to engage in harmful and antisocial behaviors and blackmailing them through schemes such as “sextortion,” where criminals use coercion to extort sexual favors from victims or threaten the release of sexual images or information to demand money.⁷ Legislation should ensure that social media platforms do not permit abuse by predators or undermine the rights of parents to protect their children from harm. Finally, research is beginning to emerge about the harmful effects social media can have on the mental health of young people.⁸ Legislation to protect children online should address this threat.

We are grateful that Congress has begun to focus serious attention on this growing problem. We encourage you to continue to use your authority effectively to protect children and vulnerable people online.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Borys Gudziak
Archbishop of Ukrainian Catholic
Archeparchy of Philadelphia
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Most Reverend Robert E. Barron
Bishop of Winona-Rochester
Chairman, Committee on Laity, Marriage,
Family Life and Youth



Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.
Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph
Chairman, Committee on the Protection of
Children and Young People



Most Reverend Robert P. Reed
Auxiliary Bishop of Boston
Chairman, Committee on Communications

⁷ Internet Bulletin, “Sextortion: It’s more common than you think.” Immigration and Customs Enforcement (available at <https://www.ice.gov/features/sextortion>) (last accessed: May 18, 2023).

⁸ Riehm, K.E. et al., “Associations Between Time Spent Using Social Media and Internalizing and Externalizing Problems Among US Youth,” *JAMA Psychiatry* 76 (2019).