

Children on the Internet – Law Enforcement Challenges

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Abstract

The current technological development and the increased access of people of different ages to devices connected to the Internet pose new challenges to the law enforcement for preventing, as well as for investigating such crimes. Children, who have access to multiple devices connected to the internet, in association with other factors linked to their age, are a very vulnerable segment of population. As members of the implementation team of the Cyberex RO Project – Improving, cooperating and preventing in the fight against cybercrime, we conducted a research aiming to identify the main risks and vulnerabilities faced by young students aged 10 to 18 in Romania in the online environment. The results were used to train police officers from crime prevention units in Romania, in order to increase their understanding of cybercrime and current trends. This paper discusses the results of the qualitative analysis of interviews with law enforcement officers from ten counties in Romania regarding the main challenges that the police have faced in handling cyber cases involving children, in order to substantiate, on a scientific basis, the activities of preventing cybercrime against children.

Keywords: Challenges, Children victimisation, Cybercrime, Police; Prevention

Introduction

With the technological development and the increased access of people of different ages to more and more devices connected to the Internet, crime has either shifted from the real-life environment to the online world, either new vulnerabilities and types of attacks have emerged that can only take place online.

Without proper knowledge and appropriate skills, the risk of becoming a victim of cybercrime is high. Children are surrounded and have instant access to a myriad of information and if they are not taught how to handle it, they can easily endanger themselves or others (Phippen, 2017).

Therefore, the law enforcement has to tackle cyber offences in which children are involved more often than

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before (Europol, 2021) and must be kept up to date with the latest technologies and special juvenile hearing techniques to investigate these types of cases.

The same situation is faced by the police officers from the crime prevention units, who must be aware of the current trends in cybercrime, especially when it comes to such specific crimes as child pornography on the Internet or cyber-attacks with minor victims.

Several studies regarding the presence of children on the Internet have addressed this issue from the children's perspective (Barbovski et al., 2021; Smahel et al., 2020; Velicu et al., 2019). There are also studies that focused on the legal issues and on the policy regarding online child safety (Molter et al., 2021; Pisaric, 2012; Savirimuthu, 2012). However there is a third category of studies concerning the emotional impact on the police officers investigating children exploitation on the internet (Burns et al., 2008; Powell et al., 2015; Powell et al., 2014).

The research questions that this research project aims to answer are the following:

- How do the police officers who investigate cyber-crimes portray the children who are victims of these crimes?
- What are the risks and vulnerabilities of children that they identified when they solved cyber-crimes cases involving minor victims?

The results of the qualitative analysis of interviews with law enforcement officers who handle cases of cyber-attacks involving children or cases of child pornography

on the Internet have been discussed. These interviews focused on identifying the factors that favour children victimization on the Internet, on the difficulties in handling such cases and the ways in which victimization can be reduced.

Besides their scientific value, the results of the larger study of which these interviews were a part, were used for training police officers in Romania which deal with crime prevention, to make them more aware of the conducts that children have on the Internet, the risky situations they are confronted with and what determines them to commit or become victims of such crimes, according to their age. This knowledge is meant to substantiate, on a scientific basis, the activities of preventing cybercrime against children and to develop an adequate message for the target group, which consists of children aged between ten and eighteen years.

Methods

The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study, *Risks and vulnerabilities of young students in the online environment* (General Inspectorate of Romanian Police, 2021), initiating the prevention component of Ro Cyberex Project – Improving, cooperating and preventing in the fight against cybercrime.²

The interviews took place between 16 March and 30 April 2020 and were conducted by sociologists from the territorial units of crime analysis and prevention, on the basis of the interview guide that we made available to them. Twelve police officers fighting cyber-crime involving minor victims from ten counties in Romania

2 *Ro Cyberex Project* – Improving, cooperating and preventing in the fight against cybercrime, funded by the European Union from the Internal Security Fund – Component for Police Cooperation addresses the need to improve investigative and preventive capacity in the field of cybercrime, as well as to facilitate cooperation and the exchange of information and best practices in this area of crime. The two main components of the project initiated at the end of 2019, with a duration of three years, were supported by the training of Law enforcement personnel, both on combating and preventing cybercrimes with children victims. The prevention component started with a study (General Inspectorate of Romanian Police, 2021) aimed, first of all, at identifying the main risks and vulnerabilities faced by young students aged 10 to 18 in Romania in the online environment (mainly child pornography and cyber-attacks), in order to substantiate, on a scientific basis, the activities of preventing online crime against children. Within this project, we were members of the implementation team, as research experts, carrying out both the research methodology and the analysis, interpretation of data and drafting of the research report. To achieve the research objectives, we used a mixed approach, quantitative and qualitative methods altogether. The study itself was designed around 3 different stages: 1. A survey on a sample of 1445 young students, nationally representative for the population of students aged 10-18 years; The objectives of the survey included the description of children's usage habits and their behaviour on the Internet, the assessment of their level of knowledge and the safety measures that they use on the Internet, and identifying risk factors and vulnerabilities to cyber-attacks and child pornography; We also identified the need to inform this segment of population about online safety measures; 2. Interviews with teachers of children aged 10 to 18 (leading teachers and computer science teachers) from ten counties in Romania and Bucharest; 3. Interviews with police officers from units fighting against organized crime who have investigated cases of cyber-attacks involving minor victims and cases of child pornography from ten counties in Romania and Bucharest. Through the interviews, both with teachers and police officers, we tried to identify the main challenges that people dealing with children have faced in handling cyber cases, as well as to find ways in which the investigation and knowledge about risky conduct of children on the internet can be improved.

(Alba, Bacău, Caraș-Severin, Gorj, Galați, Giurgiu, Iași, Prahova, Suceava, Timiș) and Bucharest, the capital city, were interviewed.

The guide was divided into two sections – cyber-attacks involving minor victims and child pornography – each structured on the following dimensions: trends, modus operandi and reasoning behind the crime, methods used by criminals to approach the victims, the relationship between the victim and the author, the profile of the victims, the profile of the authors, the factors that influence victimization and its consequences, the main challenges faced in handling such cases, measures to increase the reporting rate and measures to reduce victimization of children.

For the analysis, we created a category system based on the interview guide and coded the material obtained from the interviews using the MaxQDa software and then we interpreted the results.

The results

The officers involved in investigating cybercrimes show that children have a rather small share in the total number of people involved in such crimes and they are more often victims than perpetrators. From the wide range of crimes that take place on the Internet, children are involved mainly in acts of child pornography and, less often, in cyber-attacks.

In addition to the upward trend of cybercrime that has occurred in recent years, the police officers interviewed also noticed an increase in groups of people who discuss and exchange information or software solutions to make cyber-attacks more efficient, but also in groups of individuals who have similar concerns and exchange materials that contain child pornography.

Child pornography on the internet

As shown by the police who investigated such cases, child pornography on the Internet is extremely diverse, ranging from the exchange of materials with explicit sexual content between two minors to adults exploiting minors for their own pleasure.

In the case of love relationships between two minors, they exchange different materials with explicit sexual

content that they make by themselves, and when the two separate, blackmailing, threatening or mockery of the other in the group of friends or online occurs. In this situation, sexual images are required as a proof of love between the two of them and as a normal step in the development of these relationships,

"we are generally talking about teenagers who, within their emotional relationships, consider that, at a certain point in their relationship, exchanging such material is something very natural, everything happens by mutual consent... I think they have no real idea of the danger they are exposing themselves to. They don't realize that the actual relationship will end in a month, a year, after which those materials depicting them in such postures remain, they have no control over the re-spective materials" (Police officer fighting cybercrime).

Another reason why people get involved in child pornography cases, especially concerning minor perpetrators, is revenge or humiliation of certain people they already know in real life, even various "jokes" towards people in their entourage. They distribute images or videos of a sexual nature or that contain nudity without realizing that the materials they produce or share can have serious consequences for the victim in the long term, but also for the perpetrators, who do not realize that what they are doing is illegal.

Speaking of minor perpetrators, police officers noticed more and more kids that find by accident or to whom friends from various groups send pictures or videos illustrating other kids in pornographic stances. Without knowing that this is a crime, they save that material in their phone or send it to other friends.

In the same register there are also children who take nude photos or videos of themselves, and they do not pass them on, but they store the material on their phone. When the phone is given to friends or colleagues for another purpose, they find those images and they pass the recordings or the photos on to online groups or other people, without the knowledge of the victim. They do this as a prank and don't realize that it is a crime and the consequences of their actions.

Then, the police officers speak about the "classical" type of child pornography, when adults approach children in order to obtain images with an explicit sexual character, which consists either only in watching such images, or even in actually producing sexual acts with minors. The reason why they do this is either for their

own pleasure or to obtain amounts of money from those who "consume" such images with sexual content involving children. Others combine the two reasons and others just exchange such images between them, out of the desire to get as many such images as possible.

Usually, they use fake profiles on social media platforms and spend quite a lot of time choosing the perfect victim, using various information that they can access in advance. After compiling the list of information, criminals can build their speech and approach to the victim so that they can get what they want. Victims are usually approached progressively: initially, the perpetrator tries to create a connection with the victim and gain her or his trust, and later, the perpetrator starts asking the victim for images that do not necessarily have sexual content. Over time, the images requested become more and more explicit, "a progressive transition is made from a little girl dressed in a dress, who plays in the park, and after 2-3 conversations in which 'have you ever seen what it looks like...? Have you ever seen?', they move to an increasingly vulgar, pornographic mode of expression". (Police officer fighting cybercrime). Adult perpetrators who want to obtain child pornography for their own pleasure usually send victims images of other children in similar poses to convince them that everything is normal and that many other children of the same age do these things, **"everyone now has a set of photos, of videos, which they use as bait"** (Police officer fighting cybercrime).

In addition to gaining trust of the victim, she or he is getting blackmailed: after a period of time in which they had more and more vulgar discussions and obtained more and more compromising images, the perpetrator threatens the child that he will send the previously obtained materials to his group of friends, school colleagues or even parents, and the child – already having feelings of fear, shame or both and seeing himself in a hopeless situation – does what the offender asks, who is no longer his "friend" at this stage, but someone he hates and is terrified of.

There are also victims to whom promises of a material nature (money, goods, work contracts abroad, etc.) or affective (long-term relationship, founding a family, marriage, etc.) are made to determine them to produce and share CSAM. These promises are related to the process of studying the victim, through which the perpetrator can figure out what the victim's needs are.

Another situation is when children are abused by their own parents, on order to sell the images produced during the sexual abuse (videos or photos) to the interested people. In this case, the victims are very young children, from a few months of age, and the parents are usually starting to establish links with consumers of CSAM from the beginning of their pregnancy.

Although children of any age could become victims of child pornography on the Internet, from a few months up to the age of 18, interviewed police officers identified several common factors that can favour victimization in the cases of the children above ten years old. One of the risk factors is poor communication with their parents or the adults who take care of them. Such a relationship is either obvious, or the communication between the child and his or her parents is focused only on everyday issues, without in-depth conversations and without sharing their feelings in a real way. In this context, the adults don't supervise their children's use of the Internet and they have no idea what their children are doing when they are online, they do not know anything about the people their children meet online, even less about the content of their conversations or their posts.

Another common characteristic of the victims is that they use the internet since their early childhood, but do not have too much technical knowledge and do not have a clear picture of how information flows on the Internet. In addition, the police officers found that the victims had a low self-esteem as well as a need for affirmation and approval from others more pronounced than those specific to their age. This need prompts them to create content with a sexual touch that they distribute online, out of the desire to receive appreciation from those who follow them. Besides the very large number of friends on social platforms, this content is precisely what attracts the attention of criminals. It is a sign for perpetrators that they have chances to easily befriend the child and later gain his or her trust in order to obtain pornographic materials from him/her.

In cases of child pornography, the victimization is usually repeated over a long period of time. This happens because, once on the Internet, the CSAM can be distributed and stored millions of times, in all corners of the world. The child may be re-victimized by the same perpetrator several times in order to get more from the victim or may be re-victimized by other persons who

had nothing to do with the original event, but who obtained the images from elsewhere.

The consequences of victimization are diverse: psychological trauma, decreased school performance, depression, insomnia, self-isolation tendencies, low self-esteem and distrust in other people, moving to another school or even school dropout, suicide. Besides the immediate physical and psychological consequences, a strong impact on the emotional development of the child occurs.

Law enforcement challenges in investigating online child pornography

The first difficulty comes from the very nature of the crime: the fact that it takes place online, where the perpetrators can successfully hide very well behind anonymised connections. The solutions for anonymization are very easy to find online and very cheap, often free of charge. Also, in this environment, sex offenders can be anywhere in the world, including in countries with which police cooperation is difficult.

Delayed reporting of cases and the high rate of non-reporting such crimes are also obstacles in the investigation. A large proportion of minors who fall victim to cybercrime believe that blocking certain sites or users is sufficient. These actions give them a false sense of security, but the personal data, information, photos remain in the possession of the authors or others who have come into their possession and can be used further.

Given that the reporting of events to the police is done quite late, when the images have been shared many times to a lot of people or have been posted on various sites, minimizing the consequences for the victim and managing the situation is difficult. The investigators warn that, if the victim would report the situation earlier, then the impact on his or her life could be reduced.

Considering the sexual nature of the crime, the victims are often tempted to hide some details to the police or even to delete the images that are the subject of the investigation. Especially if the parents do not know how to react when the child confesses the things he or she is going through, the child is much more reluctant to give all the details related to what happened. When there is no trust and good communication between

parents and children, children try to hide certain details that could be useful to the investigation. They delete crucial information or delay reporting what happened.

There are also situations in which children talk to their parents about the experiences they have gone through, and parents sometimes make hasty decisions such as blocking certain people, websites, or deleting important evidence, before calling the police: "The first reaction is to delete all the pictures, to delete the child's profile from the Internet, to break any contact with the paedophile, with the aggressor", thus making the investigation more difficult.

The police officers also encountered parents who tried to catch the perpetrators themselves, organizing meetings with them on the child's profile, but not having the necessary experience, the perpetrators realized the trap and deleted many pieces of evidence.

Another challenge faced by the police officers that handle cases involving multiple juvenile perpetrators is their tendency to collude in order not to provide too many details. Believing that they only made a joke, they don't want to blame their friends that could be held criminally responsible for an act whose consequences they don't realize or understand. During the auditions, the police officers are perceived as strangers and enemies that want to harm their friends, even though nothing that bad happened in their perception.

Cyber attacks

When talking about cyber-attacks, and more specifically the ones in which children are involved either as perpetrators or victims, we must keep in mind that the numbers of such crimes that the police record do not reflect the reality due to the practice of low reporting or the small number of people that do realise that they have become a victim. Often, in these types of crimes, data is stolen without the person noticing it, and used later to commit other crimes or sold to organised crime groups.

Children are easy targets for cyber attackers because they have access to multiple devices, they do not use complex passwords, are easy to manipulate and because they do not understand the importance of their own data. Police officers have encountered cases in which the perpetrators have contacted the victims on

social media websites using fake or stolen accounts and have determined them to reveal their password or the reset code, taking over their account, in order to commit other types of crimes or to sell it on the dark web.

In recent years, law enforcement personnel have seen an increase and a development of online groups in which perpetrators are exchanging information or software to improve their attacks. Therefore, the attackers do not need special skills to orchestrate these attacks and can buy or borrow programmes from more experienced users and that is why they have seen very young children, without technical abilities or which have not studied programming, organise and commit cyber-attacks that seem to require a certain level of knowledge.

Concerning children as perpetrators of cyber-attacks, police officers are often confronted with cases in which the children use their parents' cards without permission and when the parents notice that their money disappears, they come to the police and file a complaint without knowing that the "thief" is their own child.

Another frequent type of case in which children are involved as authors that has been investigated by police officers is the one in which children access without right the social media accounts of their colleagues or friends, often by simply guessing their passwords which do not meet the minimum complexity requirements.

In most of the cases, data stolen by children during cyber-attacks is used only to brag about their skills in front of their peer group, and not with the purpose of doing something else with it.

Police officers have reported also cases in which children have committed a type of cyber-attack known as "defacement", which consists of unauthorised access to a webpage and changing certain visual elements. Behind the reasoning of this type of attack is again the need for approval, admiration and appreciation from others.

Law enforcement agents believe children commit such crimes in order to stand out, sometimes to obtain money or in order to take revenge on friends, boyfriends or girlfriends and teachers.

Most of the perpetrators are males over 15 years old, live mostly in urban areas and come from financially stable families. They act on their own and access forums or websites or get in contact with others only to improve their skills and obtain software programs that could facilitate their attacks.

"The skills or the technological knowledge are obtained through accessing online resources or websites on which others teach them what to do" (Police officer fighting cybercrime).

Ways to reduce online victimization

In order to reduce online children victimization, the police officers believe that there must be a solid partnership between the school, parents, police, non-governmental organizations and IT&C actors, so that the messages reach all the vectors involved in managing these situations.

Children need to be very clearly informed about the risks they can be exposed to on the Internet, so that they realize that what they do on the Internet or through the devices they use can also have consequences in real life. They need to acknowledge that the information and images that reach the Internet can no longer be completely deleted and can be distributed extremely quickly.

Moreover, those who have become a victim of cyber-crimes must know that there are solutions for the problems they face and that there are people who can offer them help to get out of the situations they categorize as "no escape".

The police investigators say that informing children is essential, so that they realize that they are victim and that what happens to them is not unimportant. They need to know that they can ask for help from the authorities and the perpetrators can be punished for their actions.

Both parents and teachers should be informed about the applications for monitoring children's online activity, the importance of effective communication, the signs to look for in order to realize that the child has a problem, the steps to follow and the things they must avoid doing, but also information about the institu-

tions empowered to act and the procedure to follow when their children face this kind of crime.

At the same time, it is important that parents are taught to react when children confess certain things to them, to think ahead, to act very carefully and to realize that they need to call the police in such cases, in order to minimize the effects on the child and to avoid re-victimization, they ***"must learn to exploit the moment when the child is willing to talk"***. (Police officer fighting cybercrime).

Parents and teachers should also understand that such situations can have long-term consequences, that it is not enough to solve such events step by step as they appear and that it is necessary to contact specialists as soon as possible from the moment of learning about the occurrence of the negative event, so that the effects of victimization are minimized and the appropriate measures against the perpetrators are taken.

Discussion and Conclusions

First of all the survey aimed to investigate children habits of using the Internet and identifying the unpleasant situations which children have been confronted with on the Internet. The interviews with teachers were focused on the need for education regarding the safe use of the Internet by children. The interviews with the police officers investigating cybercrime brought up another aspect: the factors that favour the online victimization of children and the ways in which it could be reduced.

Cybercrime investigators most often encounter children rather as victims than as perpetrators in cases of child pornography or cyber-attacks. Both situations are closely related to social networks platforms, their accounts being targeted by attacks for the second category of crimes or used as communication channels in the first phase, and later as a means of distributing compromising content, in the case of child pornography.

Velicu et al. (2019) concluded that the main activity of children between ages 9 and 16 on the internet is related to social media networks, which explains why most of the crimes concerning minors are happening through these channels. In the interviews conducted with the police officers from Romania, it became

apparent that the main means in which children are becoming involved in these types of crimes is related to their use of social media platforms, being consistent with the results of the above mentioned study.

Police officers state that the factors that favour the online victimization of children revolve around their young age and the naivety associated with it, in association with a low knowledge of the Internet use and the risks involved. Under the rule of curiosity and social pressures, the risk of victimization of young people increases. Moreover, easy access to digital services is an additional factor.

Not all factors concern children, but elements such as poor supervision of their online activity, poor communication, as well as the lack of knowledge regarding the risks of using the Internet also affect parents or those who take care of children.

Police officers identified the lack of adult supervision, of appropriate skills or of the awareness needed to adequately educate the children as risk factors regarding children's online safety. This finding is in accordance with Helsper's et al. study (2013), in which children in Romania were classified as "semi-supported risky gamers", because they are more likely to experience online bullying and to meet strangers offline and their parents are one of the most likely to have a passive attitude towards their children behaviour on the internet, caused by their own deficit of knowledge regarding online safety.

Furthermore, if some form of supervision exists, it is mainly focused on restrictions and not on actively teaching their children how to react in certain situations or on what measures they should adopt in order to avoid victimization. This confirms the results of Smahel et al. study (2020), which have emphasized the importance of adult supervision when talking about children's online safety, because they, on their own, cannot understand the impact that their online activity has. The parents should impose restrictive measures and should not rely solely on those, but they should also focus on communication and teach their children about the appropriate behaviour when accessing online apps or software.

Another study (Moore et al., 2012) has concluded that there are statistically significant associations between parent marital status and the risk of becoming a perpetrator or victim of electronic bullying, suggesting that

children which live with both their parents and children with married parents are less likely to be involved in such crimes.

These conclusions might relate to the lack of or deficiencies in parental supervision, given that it was identified by law enforcement officers as a risk factor for all types of internet-based crimes in which children are involved because in non-intact families, children might not have such good communication with their parents or one or both of the parents might neglect mediating their children internet use.

The long-term effects are the most severe and the risk increases given the fact that online child victimization can extend over a long period, with varied perpetrators, even long after the first event.

The difficulties in investigating cybercrimes with child victims refer both to the criminals' ability to remain anonymous and to the morale of the victim. It influences the smooth conduct of the investigation, since, due to fear or shame, the victim does not provide all the necessary information. Also, the desire of the vic-

tims or their relatives to solve problems with their own means, ignoring the proportions of the problem or the late reporting of the crime are elements that complicate the investigation.

For reducing the victimization of children, police officers emphasize the need for strong a partnership between all stakeholders involved in educating and preventing cybercrimes, so that a unified message could reach both children and their tutors.

The most important thing that all children need to be aware of is that the actions they take on the Internet or through their devices have real-life consequences. They also need to be aware of the risks they might face on the internet and the consequences of their actions online. Police officers have also suggested that children should be taught what precautions they can take to avoid victimization, the steps they need to take when they become victims, what are the actions on the Internet that are punished by law and the fact that they can ask for help from the authorities when they are faced with such situations.

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