

**TESTIMONY OF**

**MICHELLE COLLINS**

**Vice President**

**Exploited Children Division**

**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN**

**for the**

**UNITED STATES SENATE**

**COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION,**

**PRODUCT SAFETY AND INSURANCE**

**“Protecting Youths in an Online World”**

**July 15, 2010**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I welcome this opportunity to appear before you to discuss the risks to children on the Internet. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) joins you in your concern for the safety of our youth and thanks you for bringing attention to this serious problem facing America's communities.

As you know, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is a not-for-profit corporation, mandated by Congress and working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice. NCMEC is a public-private partnership, funded in part by Congress and in part by the private sector. For 26 years NCMEC has operated under Congressional mandate to serve as the national resource center and clearinghouse on missing and exploited children. This statutory mandate (see 42 U.S.C. §5773) includes 19 specific operational functions, among which are:

- operating a national 24-hour toll-free hotline, 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678), to intake reports of missing children and receive leads about ongoing cases;
- providing technical assistance and training to individuals and law enforcement agencies in the prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of cases involving missing and exploited children;
- tracking the incidence of attempted child abductions;
- providing forensic technical assistance to law enforcement;
- facilitating the deployment of the National Emergency Child Locator Center during periods of national disasters;
- working with law enforcement and the private sector to reduce the distribution of child pornography over the Internet;
- operating a child victim identification program to assist law enforcement in identifying victims of child pornography;
- developing and disseminating programs and information about Internet safety and the prevention of child abduction and sexual exploitation;
- providing technical assistance and training to law enforcement in identifying and locating non-compliant sex offenders; and
- operating the CyberTipline, the “9-1-1 for the Internet,” that the public and electronic service providers may use to report Internet-related child sexual exploitation.

The CyberTipline is the national clearinghouse for leads and tips regarding child sexual exploitation crimes. It is operated in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”), the Department of Homeland Security’s Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“ICE”), the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces (“ICAC”), the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, as well as other state and local law enforcement. We receive reports in eight categories of crimes against children:

- possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography;
- online enticement of children for sexual acts;
- child prostitution;
- sex tourism involving children
- extrafamilial child sexual molestation;
- unsolicited obscene material sent to a child;
- misleading domain names; and
- misleading words or digital images on the Internet.

These reports are made by both the public and by Electronic Service Providers, who are required by law to report to the CyberTipline. The leads are reviewed by NCMEC analysts, who examine and evaluate the content, add related information that would be useful to law enforcement, use publicly-available search tools to determine the geographic location of the apparent criminal act, and provide all information to the appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation. These reports are also triaged to ensure that children in imminent danger get first priority.

The FBI, ICE and Postal Inspection Service have “real time” access to the CyberTipline, and assign agents and analysts to work at NCMEC. In the 12 years since the CyberTipline began, NCMEC has received and processed more than 920,000 reports. To date, electronic service providers have reported to the CyberTipline more than 7.5 million images of sexually exploited children. To date, more than 35 million child pornography images and videos have been reviewed by the analysts in our Child Victim Identification Program, which assists prosecutors to secure convictions for crimes involving identified child victims and helps law enforcement to locate and rescue child victims who have not yet been identified.

NCMEC is pleased to have participated in the Online Safety and Technology Working Group (OSTWG) created by this Committee's legislation. Its membership comprised a broad spectrum of knowledge and experience in the online safety arena. The report recently issued by OSTWG contains important recommendations for progress.

I'd like to underscore the OSTWG Report's conclusion that approaches to online safety must take into account the dynamic nature of technology and the ways that it can be used. We agree that everyone has a role to play: parents/guardians can become more involved in their children's online activities; industry can actively self-regulate to keep its users safer; and the government can help increase awareness and encourage digital literacy. These efforts would benefit significantly from comprehensive, up-to-date information on these issues. Given the rapidly changing landscape of online communication, we strongly recommend that current research be conducted and maintained.

The Internet offers tremendous potential, especially for youth. It has changed the way we communicate, learn and conduct our daily activities. Unfortunately, the Internet can also be used to victimize children. The combination of widespread use and relative anonymity makes it an appealing tool for those who seek child victims.

This is supported by our own data: reports to the CyberTipline about online enticement of children for sexual acts have increased 714% since 1998. The attachments to my written testimony contain excerpts from actual reports that illustrate this problem.

Youth will often engage in risky behavior, in both the 'real' world and in the online world. The combination of the Internet, easy transmission of digital images, and poor judgment can lead to serious and unintended consequences for youth -- including becoming the victim of enticement, blackmail, harassment and exploitation by both adults and other youth. Webcams, cell phone Internet access and social networking sites increase the vulnerability of our children.

Webcams offer the exciting ability to see the person you're communicating with over the Internet. While this technology has many benefits, it can also be used to exploit children. The

reports to our CyberTipline of incidents involving children and webcams have increased. Many children are victimized inadvertently, by appearing on their webcams without clothes as a joke, or on a dare from friends, unaware that these images may end up in a global child pornography enterprise. Other children are victims of blackmail, threatened with disclosure to friends and family if his or her ‘performance’ before the webcam doesn’t become more sexually explicit.

Cell phones have placed the Internet in our children’s pockets. From January 2008 to December 2009 there was a 650% increase of CyberTipline reports in which a cell phone was involved in the sexual victimization of a child. A 2008 online survey of 653 teens between the ages of 13 and 19 conducted by TRU and presented by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com found that 20% of teens surveyed have posted nude or seminude pictures of themselves online. In addition, 39% of teens surveyed have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages (text, e-mail, IM).

‘Sexting’ is a term coined by the media that generally refers to youth writing sexually explicit messages, taking sexually explicit photos of themselves or others in their peer group, and transmitting those photos and/or messages to their peers. This is an increasing problem that should be addressed through education of both parents and youth about the long-term consequences of apparently “innocent” activity among friends.

Social networking sites appeal to children’s natural desire for self-expression. These hugely popular sites permit users to create online profiles containing detailed and highly personal information ----- which can sometimes be used by individuals to forge a “cyber-relationship” that can lead to a child being victimized. Children need to be taught the value of limiting access to their personal information to only those who are in their known circle of friends and family.

NCMEC has two resources that can help parents and youth learn about ways to be safer on the Internet:

- NetSmartz is an interactive, educational safety resource for children, parents, guardians, educators, and law enforcement that uses age-appropriate, 3-D activities to teach children how to stay safer on the Internet.

- NetSmartz411 is an Internet Safety Helpdesk, an online resource for parents and guardians that can answer questions about Internet safety, computers, portable communications devices, and much more.

NCMEC is actively engaged with industry leaders on their efforts to make youth less vulnerable when using their services. We encourage them to prohibit illegal and abusive activity as one of their terms of service and to enforce this vigorously. It is important for them to take reports of abuse by their users and to make their users aware of this reporting ability.

However, the critical factor in youth online safety is parental involvement. Nothing can replace the value of parents understanding what their children are doing online, and why, and helping them develop good judgment in their online communications.

Thank you.