NEWS RELEASE

Online exploitation of children in NJ increases by over 200% during COVID-19

June 17, 2020: As children in New Jersey stayed home during the pandemic and spent more time on devices, online exploitation by predators increased by over 200%. During COVID-19 for the period of March 1 thru May 23, the NJ Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force received 2380 reports from the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children, up from 760 reports in 2019 during the same time period. Although not every report was of a predator victimizing a child, the overall online exploitation numbers more than doubled, illustrating the underlying risks to children and teens of spending more time online.

The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NJCAHT) has been raising the alarm on this issue during the pandemic, encouraging families to pay attention to their children's online lives and talk to them about staying safe when they play games or use apps. Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) - a term now used instead of "child pornography" - is often initially shared online by a victimized child that has been tricked or manipulated. To prevent the initial sharing being used against the child by the predator, families are urged to be understanding and supportive of their child and not shame them. Shame is frequently a method predators and traffickers use to further coerce children into more acts of exploitation, including forcing them to become victims of child sex trafficking.

The NJCAHT invited Lieutenant John Pizzuro of the New Jersey State Police's Internet Crimes Against Children Unit, to give an update to its members on June 11, following his public presentation online for the organization in April. As he told members, "The new normal has become distance learning and other forms of virtual communication. This is the virtual playground where children reside and it has given predators the ability to be on the same playground with those children without parents knowing." Lt. Pizzuro said that, during the pandemic, there was an increase in children and teens sending sexually explicit videos of themselves, and that "these videos often fall into the hands of predators which makes teens and children vulnerable to "sextortion" and other forms of victimization." He also shared that one in five children have been sexually solicited online and 14% have actually met face to face with someone they met online.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

To help families better understand the subtle methods predators and traffickers use to groom children for exploitation and future trafficking, the NJCAHT has a special webpage: https://www.njhumantrafficking.org/prevent-online-grooming. Grooming can start out with "likes" on social media and progress to buying children gaming dollars or offering support and encouragement. Predators understand the need children have to be liked and validated on social media, and the isolation that children feel when they are not included in pictures posted by their friends. Predators try to give children the attention they seek online and once they have gained a child's trust they will attempt to exploit them.

Parents need to communicate the risks in an age-appropriate way and monitor their children's social media and web activities while fostering an environment of trust. Kate Lee, the Executive Director of the NJCAHT states, "It is imperative that families understand the danger of online grooming, and how it can lead to exploitation and trafficking. The information provided on our website explains the risks but also provides solutions, which we hope will leave families feeling empowered to have important conversations with their children about staying safe from online predators now and in the future."

The New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking is an entirely volunteer-run nonprofit representing over 180 organizations in New Jersey, with a mission to unite NJ communities to abolish human trafficking. More information about the organization can be found on its website: https://www.njhumantrafficking.org. To report online child exploitation go to: https://report.cybertip.org