

## **NEW JERSEY COALITION AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

### **Trafficking & Exploitation via Apps and the Dark Web - APRIL 23, 2020**

With over 250 online participants from multiple states and disciplines, the virtual program hosted by the NJCAHT on 4/23/20 could not have come at a more opportune time due to children in social isolation and being taught via distance learning. Their time on social media and various “apps” has increased and therefore their exposure to potential predators has increased.

Lt. John Pizzuro, NJ Commander of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, and part of the NJ State Police’s Internet Crimes Against Children Unit, and Jeffrey W. Anthony, Certified Health Education Specialist for the Middlesex County Center for Empowerment gave the listeners an in depth view of how our children are being targeted online through gaming and social media, and how we can help them and ourselves understand how these outlets are used and how we can talk with our children.

Lt. Pizzuro is worried about the increase in children being “groomed” online especially in the 8 – 9 year old range. At this age psychologists believe they do not have “shame” with the result that children “self produce” CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material) on their own devices and send it to online predators.

One in five children have been sexually solicited online and 14% have actually met face to face with someone they met online. Children today communicate through devices. Our brains however, are looking for release of various endorphins usually based on human contact. Children and even some adults are looking for validation of their part in the larger society of their peers by “likes” or tangible items...goods or services.

As a dopamine dependent society face-to-face interaction is important, but the increased use of devices limits that. Apps such as Whisper and Scout are anonymous; the dark web has “rooms” where predators with the same intentions can meet. Law enforcement continually monitors these apps, etc., but is stopped from pursuing perpetrators by the very apps that are used due to anonymity.

Parents must communicate the risks and monitor social media and web activities while fostering an environment of trust so children and young adults will feel comfortable discussing what they are experiencing, especially since children younger and younger have devices with mobile apps and Internet access. It is also difficult to know what the “next” new media is and predators are often one step ahead.

Jeff Anthony and the Center for Empowerment looks to increase understanding of the digital world by “helping young people develop practical skills for the digital world.” With human trafficking affecting millions whether through forced labor, sexual exploitation or organ harvesting, “victims can be any age, race, gender or nationality”.

In working with victims of sexual exploitation and their partner or family member, “harm reduction” allows for the individual to understand that there are various circumstances that contribute to their being a victim and these are not created by anything that they did. Being a Positive Decision Making Mentor gives you the tools to work with the child in an approachable manner without making assumptions. It also shows how to answer a child’s questions openly and how to avoid conflict. Give children the opportunity to speak and to not judge.

**Further resources can be found at [www.nihumantrafficking.org/covid19](http://www.nihumantrafficking.org/covid19)**