

Commercial child pornography: A brief snapshot of the Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography

Overview

Commercial child pornography (commercial CP) is one type of online exploitation that involves the sale of pornographic images and videos of children for profit. These websites often cater to their consumers by accepting a variety of traditional payment methods, such as credit cards, and alternative payment options, such as pseudo-currency, for the purchase of monthly or yearly membership access. As use of the Internet became increasingly widespread, commercial CP websites were easily and instantly accessible to millions of people around the world. In 2001, the CyberTipline at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children started tracking reports regarding commercial CP websites.

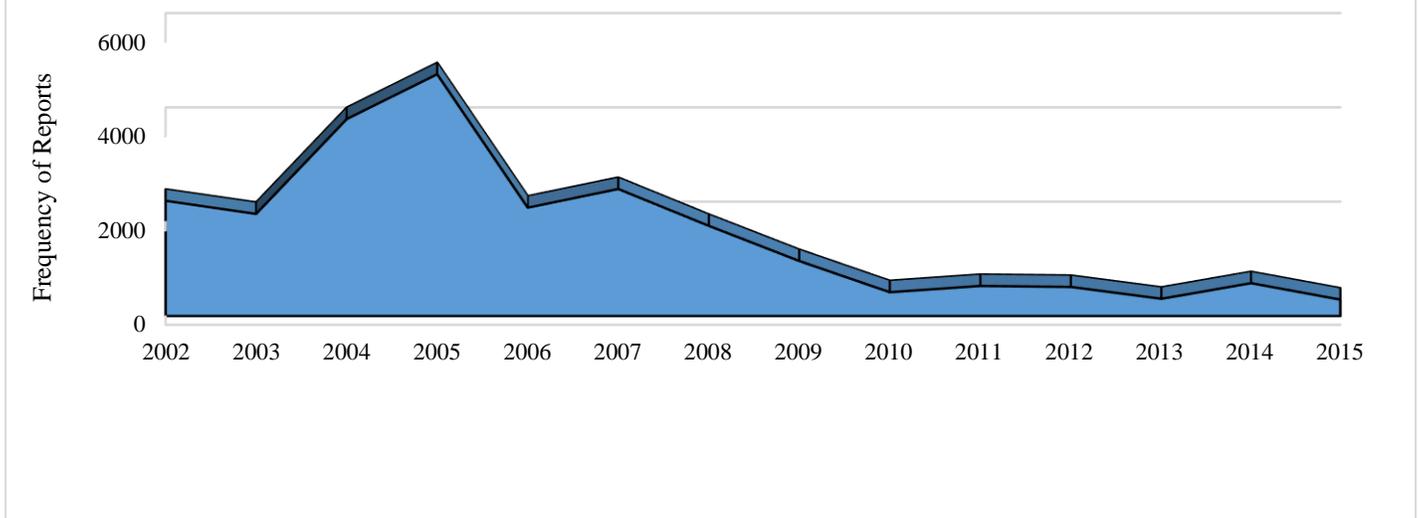
- Since 2001, NCMEC has received more than 26,000 reports involving websites purporting to sell access to child pornography.
- Of the reports in which the payment method was known, it was most common for sites to offer at least two different payment methods, although some included as many as five or six methods. While websites offering multiple options were more likely to be comprised of traditional payment methods, pseudo-currency was more commonly the sole payment method when only one option was offered.
- In just 3 years, these reports more than doubled, from approximately 2,500 reports in 2002 (the first full year NCMEC received these reports) to more than 5,000 reports in 2005. In 2005 when the number of these reports peaked, NCMEC had already received more than half of the total commercial CP reports it would receive in the fifteen years it has received these reports.

The Establishment of the Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography

As a result of the increase in CyberTipline commercial CP reports, the Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography was formed in March 2006. The Financial Coalition, co-managed by NCMEC and ICMEC, is now comprised of 35 leading banks, credit card companies, electronic payment networks, third-party payment companies and Internet service companies dedicated to eradicating the commercial viability of child sexual abuse images and videos.

- By the end of the first year that the Financial Coalition was established, there was already a 55% reduction in commercial CP reports to the CyberTipline. Reports continued to steadily decline after 2006, resulting in a staggering 93% total reduction by the end of 2015; nearly a virtual elimination of CyberTipline commercial CP reports.
- Furthermore, among the limited commercial CP reports made to the CyberTipline in recent years, the average number of payment methods offered on these websites steadily declined despite a spike in pseudo-currency options offered in 2015; a likely result of the drastic decline in the use of traditional payment methods as options for purchasing child pornography on these websites.

NCMEC Commercial CP Reports



An In-Depth Look at the Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography

While the Financial Coalition aimed to take a broad and multi-faceted approach at tackling the commercial viability of child sexual abuse material, specific efforts by the payment industries to help reduce commercial CP were a major contributing factor to the overall decline in commercial CP reports made to the NCMEC CyberTipline.

For example, for one particular major credit card company:

- The total number of commercial CP reports made to the CyberTipline that included this payment method and the number of unique websites that offered this payment method declined drastically over time. Furthermore, as consumers' access to commercial CP became increasingly difficult with this traditional form of payment method, prices for membership access to these sites also increased over time.
 - The largest decrease in reports offering this credit card payment method occurred between 2005 and 2008, directly after the establishment and focus of the Financial Coalition. During this time, there was a 72% reduction in CyberTipline reports that included this credit card payment method; a pattern that continued and resulted in a total decrease of 89% by the end of 2015.
 - In just five years, between 2008 and 2013, the number of known unique commercial CP websites offering this credit card as a method of payment decreased from eighteen to eleven websites, while the average cost per year for membership access increased by 21%.
 - More specifically, the price of membership for one year to one particular child pornography site that offered this credit card payment method increased \$485.00 between 2008 to 2013; a 50% increase in the membership price in just five years for this particular site.

Where We Stand Today

In the early 2000s, CyberTipline commercial CP reports were at an all-time high. Out of growing concern over this problem, the Financial Coalition was established in 2006 and, since that time, commercial CP websites have virtually been eliminated. However, this trend does not indicate a simple reduction in reports made to NCMEC, but rather, is a true indication of the success of the Financial Coalition in eradicating the commercial viability of child sexual abuse images and videos. Within these commercial CP reports made to NCMEC since 2001, it has become evident that commercial CP has become more difficult to access and purchase, with declines in the number of unique websites hosting commercial CP and the average number of traditional payment options available to consumers on these websites. Subsequently, it has become more expensive to access child pornography on these websites and, where available, has shifted toward alternative payment methods that may not be as well monitored compared to the more traditional methods monitored by the banks and companies of the Financial Coalition. While the Financial Coalition has shown great success, it is our hope that new partnerships continue to be formed in the fight against commercial CP as the sale of child pornography is bound to continue and payment methods evolve and change over time.