

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105260](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The volume, complexity, and danger of sexual exploitation of children online are increasing, and have been fueled by conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to DOJ. This creates additional challenges for federal agencies, in particular law enforcement. Addressing the issue is a formidable task amid a digital landscape characterized by increasing online access, advances in technology, and increased use of encryption.

GAO was asked to review the status of federal efforts to combat the online exploitation of children, one of our most vulnerable populations, and the extent to which there is a cohesive national effort in place to address this issue. Among other things, this report: (1) describes federal government efforts to address online exploitation of children, and (2) assesses the extent to which DOJ's 2016 National Strategy to combat exploitation of children aligns with statutory requirements.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, policies, and reports. GAO interviewed federal agency, nonprofit, and industry officials with roles in addressing the online exploitation of children. GAO also analyzed the 2016 National Strategy and compared it to the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Attorney General ensure the department updates the National Strategy to fully address all statutory requirements, including appointment of a senior official, inclusion of all 19 statutory elements for the strategy, and issuance of the strategy every two years. DOJ neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-23-105260](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin, 202-512-8777, goodwing@gao.gov

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ONLINE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Department of Justice Leadership and Updated National Strategy Needed to Address Challenges

What GAO Found

Reports of suspected child sexual exploitation increased 35 percent from 2020 to 2021, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. To address this alarming trend, federal agencies have efforts underway to combat online exploitation of children. These efforts include task forces, technology innovation, training, and public awareness campaigns.

Children Online are at Risk of Exploitation by Predators



Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105260

The Congress passed the PROTECT Our Children Act of 2008 which, among other things, required the Attorney General to issue a National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction. The Act further required the strategy to be issued one year after enactment and updated every two years thereafter. However, as shown below, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has issued its strategy twice—in 2010 and 2016.

DOJ's Issuance of the National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction from 2009 through 2021

Required year of issuance	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
Strategy issued?	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
	August 2010			April 2016			

Issued but past deadline
 Not issued

Source: Department of Justice and GAO Analysis. | GAO-23-105260

DOJ has not met a number of the requirements of the 2008 Act, due in part to it not making the strategy a priority. For example, although required by law, the department did not designate a senior management official to lead the strategy's development. Instead, DOJ rotated detailees through the position of national coordinator, and nine national coordinator detailees have held the position in the last 13 years. Further, the most recent 2016 strategy did not fully include 12 of the 19 required elements established in law, such as setting targets to accomplish quantifiable goals. Moreover, the strategy is not up-to-date on key technology advances that are making it more difficult to catch perpetrators. Addressing these issues is essential to providing assurance that an overall strategy is helping to guide the many efforts focused on protecting our children.