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

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.

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.

United States Government Accountability Office