

Reddit: A Predator's Playground

A Safe Haven For Sexual Abuse Material Online.



For over a decade, Reddit has been a safe haven for child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and other illicit content. Subreddits that openly market themselves as forums for CSAM have been listed by third-party advertising tools as some of the most popular pages on the website, encouraging advertisers to buy ad space on those pages. Reddit has taken little action to block or remove this content, as it generates advertising revenue. Cases of CSAM and revenge porn material with adult victims have been reported to Reddit, but this material is not always removed and much of it has remained online. When it is removed, the material is often reuploaded shortly after, yet the users involved are not banned and are allowed to continue unchecked. Users who've attempted to shed light on this problem have been banned, making the situation worse as awareness is not as widespread as it should be. Arrests related to illicit sexual content on Reddit are rare, though the true number of cases is not known at this point in time.

Recently, a case in Oregon involving Makayla Craig, a 27-year-old registered sex offender (RSO), highlighted significant issues with Reddit's moderation policies. Craig attempted to enroll in a high school by posing as a teenager.[1] Further investigation revealed that Craig had been using Reddit to violate probation terms, which prohibited communication with minors. Craig used multiple subreddits intended for teenagers, pretending to be both a 12 and 14-year-old, and uploaded pornographic images to their profile. This information was forwarded to relevant authorities, which will hopefully result in additional charges being filed. Despite their account being flagged as NSFW, they were not banned from subreddits catering to teenagers, nor were they prohibited from posting in those communities.

Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated incident. For quite some time, Reddit users have reported adults posing as teenagers in subreddits meant for that age group or using those subreddits to prey on minors. Craig posted in a subreddit geared towards teenage "femboys" in the UK which, given the site's history, seems to exist for a purpose similar to "phishing", trying to get unsuspecting minors to upload photos for predators. The subreddit that Craig visited is likely not the only one. While it is important to document these communities, I have no desire to see those photos or spend time exploring that part of the internet, so I will not be compiling evidence nor documenting those subreddits. Such an investigation would be best handled by the FBI, DHS, Europol, Interpol, the NCA, or the NCMEC.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, based out of San Francisco, concluded in a 2022 ruling following a class action lawsuit that Reddit 'turned a blind eye' to unlawful content posted on the platform.[2] This is alarming for several reasons, one being a 2014 Washington Post article in detailing that the site at the time still had a problem with CSAM.[3] Eight years later and nothing had changed, the site continued to look the other way.

The lawsuit from the 9th Circuit Court, *Jane Does, Et al V. Reddit, Inc*, No. 21-56293, stated that after discovering explicit images or videos of the victims posted to one or more subreddits, the material was immediately reported to moderators and Reddit employees. Reddit sometimes, though not always, would remove the content, only for it to be reuploaded shortly after. This cycle repeated time and time again, with victims and their families collectively contacting Reddit hundreds of times to report the explicit posts. As of April 2021, when the lawsuit was filed, many subreddits openly marketed themselves as forums for CSAM. Both advocacy groups and the press repeatedly reported this activity to Reddit to no avail. Third-party advertising tools have listed several subreddits dedicated to CSAM as some of the most popular pages on the platform, encouraging advertisers to buy ad space on those pages. It is argued that because Reddit generates advertising revenue from CSAM, the platform has taken little action to block or remove it.[4]

In 2015, Reddit announced that the company was cracking down on revenge porn.[5] However, a 2022 BBC investigation into the trading of nudes on the platform revealed that this was not the case. Women's photos were shared on Reddit accompanied by sexual and degrading language, resulting in victims receiving rape threats. These images were shared with an audience of thousands, some of whom teamed up to expose the real-life identities of the victims. Addresses, phone numbers, and social media handles were swapped online, and victims were targeted with sexual comments, threats, and blackmail. An online marketplace for sharing and selling images of victims existed openly, with predators exploiting the situation for financial gain, leaving victims traumatized. The BBC found dozens of subreddits dedicated to sharing intimate images of women from the UK, one of which had more than 20,000 users. Revenge porn of women secretly filmed during sex or by ex-partners was also present. The process of removing revenge porn was reportedly lengthy and did nothing to prevent the material from being shared again or on other platforms. The BBC reported that seven women who had tried to get images removed from Reddit expressed concern that the site was not doing enough to help, with some saying the material was never removed.[6]

Arrests related to cases stemming from Reddit seem rare, but they do happen. On May 23, 2024, charges were announced against Shaw Warrington, a registered sex offender (RSO) from Orange County, California, who had used the platform to solicit sex from minors. He believed he was communicating with a 13-year-old girl but was actually speaking with an undercover law enforcement officer. Warrington now faces a minimum sentence of 25 years.[7] On January 12, 2024, Richard Ferrarie-Lofredo of Dover, New Jersey, was arrested in connection with possession of CSAM. Ferrarie-Lofredo uploaded CSAM to Reddit and was found in possession of additional CSAM on an electronic device.[8]

On March 29, 2023, Brian Luis Valentín-Ramos of San Juan, Puerto Rico, was charged with five counts related to possession, distribution and the sale of CSAM; conspiring to illegally obtain information from protected computers; and cyberstalking. From 2020-2023 Valentín-Ramos conspired with others to gain unauthorized access to social media accounts, including Snapchat, of his victims. These images were then publicized and sold on platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Telegram.[9] In August of 2023, Lee Allen Goudy of Howard, Ohio, was reported to the FBI for uploading CSAM online. Goudy, already a Tier II registered sex offender from 2018 charges, was sentenced to 250 months in prison for new, similar offenses. The investigation revealed that Goudy had distributed CSAM from a Reddit account via Kik and on Twitter. Approximately 650 videos and 100 images of CSAM were recovered from Goudy's iPhone. A second cell phone recovered during the investigation had an additional 150 images of CSAM that he had traded on Discord. He was arrested in September of 2023 and pleaded guilty in April of 2024.[10]

On April 18, 2022, Andrew Bradshaw, the former Mayor of Cambridge, Maryland, pleaded guilty to five counts of distributing revenge porn. Bradshaw had posted images a victim had only shared with him on Reddit, accompanied by vulgar comments and statements appearing to be written by the victim.[11] This case was widely publicized, having been covered by major news outlets, including The New York Times. The coverage highlighted the severity of the offense and the impact on the victim, bringing attention to the broader issue of revenge porn and the need for stricter regulations and enforcement.[12]

One must wonder how many cases similar to those mentioned here have gone unprosecuted, slipped through the cracks, or are not on law enforcement's radar at this point in time. A 2024 report from the DOJ's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) revealed concerning failures in the FBI's handling of child sex abuse cases. The report found that in 47% of reviewed cases, the bureau failed to comply with mandatory reporting requirements to alert state and local authorities. Even in cases where the FBI did report, only 17% of reports were fully documented. A staggering 50% of cases were not reported to social services agencies. In one instance, the FBI received a credible tip that a registered sex offender was committing child sexual abuse but failed to take appropriate investigative action for over a year. During that time, the offender allegedly victimized at least one additional minor over approximately 15 months.[13]

Prosecution rates for revenge porn in the US can be quite low. While figures vary, it is generally acknowledged that many cases go unreported or are not prosecuted. The U.S. Attorneys' annual statistical reports do not include data on sex crimes, such as revenge porn, complicating the process of finding current data.[14]

Revenge porn, a type of non-consensual porn, is defined as the distribution of sexually graphic images or videos of an individual without their consent in the context of an intimate relationship. These images and videos are typically sent to an intimate partner who then shares the material outside of its original, consensually shared context. Non-consensual porn can be obtained both with and without the victim's consent, but all types are publicly disseminated without the victim's consent. Approximately 80% of non-consensual porn is revenge porn, often posted alongside the victim's personal information such as name, phone number, email, or social media handles, leading to harassment and humiliation. While revenge porn first appeared in the 1980s, the disturbing practice did not become widespread until around 2010. Non-consensual porn can also include deepfakes, photos and videos from hidden cameras, and upskirt photos not created by the victim. In 2016, 2% of Americans reported being victims of non-consensual porn, with higher victimization rates among 18-29 year olds, 18-29 year old women, and LGBTQ+ persons. By 2017, the number of Americans aged 18-29 who had become victims of non-consensual porn rose to 12%, an increase of over 100%. In 2019, a larger study suggested that the problem had continued to grow, showing a 400% increase in the number of victims since 2016. The

COVID-19 pandemic likely exacerbated the issue, as the number of messages sent on dating apps increased by over 70%. The harms from revenge porn are unique to each victim and can be serious, resulting in significant emotional distress, social impairment, suicidal thoughts, and suicide.[15]

2022 data from the UK shows that the majority of victims of revenge porn were women, with those aged 30-39 composing 27% of total victims. Women aged 21-29 composed 15% of total victims, followed by women aged 50-59 at 12%. Girls aged 16 or younger represented 10% of total victims, and women aged 60+ were victims in 7% of cases. While male victims were not as common, men aged 30-39 made up 7% of the total percentage of victims, followed by men aged 40-49 at 3%. The percentage of men aged 21-29, 50-59, and 60+ was 2% for each age group. Interestingly, boys aged 16 or younger were reportedly 0% of the total victims, though it should be noted that these cases are often unreported, the actual number is likely to be higher.[16]

Thankfully in the past two decades the rates of prosecution for commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and CSAM have risen in the United States. From 2004-2013, the number of defendants prosecuted for CSEC offenses in U.S. district courts increased by 98%, from 1,405 to 2,776. The number of suspects referred to prosecutors for the production of CSAM increased by 195%, and those referred for child sex trafficking grew by 111%. During this period, 98% of CSEC defendants were sentenced to prison, with the average sentence length increasing from 70 to 139 months.[17]

The expansion of digital and mobile technology led to a 422% spike in the number of CSAM production offenders sentenced between 2005-2019, increasing from 98 to 512. In 2019 the average sentence for CSAM production was 23 years, with sentences ranging from 1 year to life imprisonment. In 2019 all CSAM production offenders were sentenced to a term of imprisonment, an increase from 273 months in 2005 to an average of 332 months in 2019.[18]

So, why are Reddit and the users involved in these crimes not charged? The answer is an outdated U.S. law that social media giants exploit to shield themselves from liability in lawsuits related to content uploaded to their platforms. Section 230, enacted in 1996 as part of the Communications Decency Act, provides limited federal immunity to providers of interactive computer services with respect to third-party content generated by users. Most courts consider this law to bar civil claims based on violations of criminal laws, though it does not grant complete immunity in all cases. One exception is that immunity does not extend to claims under the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017 (FOSTA), legislation enacted to make it easier to hold websites accountable for hosting content facilitating sex trafficking. There have been dozens of proposals to amend Section 230, although no further amendments have been enacted since FOSTA, with some Congressional members defending

Section 230 immunity in its current form. Some proposals include limiting Section 230 immunity for hosting another's content with the goal of incentivizing sites to take down harmful material. Other proposals have focused on exceptions for certain types of legal claims, such as drug trafficking or nondiscrimination laws. It should be noted that CSAM is not considered a form of free or protected speech under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.[19]

There have been legal challenges to Section 230, with *Gonzalez v. Google* and *Twitter v. Taamneh* being two prominent cases that could have reshaped the internet as we know it. *Gonzalez v. Google* involved claims that Google, through its subsidiary YouTube, provided material support to terrorists by allowing them to use its platform.[20] The Supreme Court vacated the 9th Circuit Court's judgment and remanded the case for reconsideration in light of *Twitter v. Taamneh*, which addressed whether Twitter can be held liable for aiding and abetting terrorism by allowing terrorist organizations to use its platform. The court ruled unanimously in favor of Twitter, finding that Twitter did not "knowingly" provide substantial assistance under 18 U.S.C. § 2333, and thus could not be held liable for aiding and abetting ISIS in its terrorist attack on a nightclub in Istanbul, Turkey.[21] Section 230 won't be dismantled easily, but if it is, online speech and material hosted on social media platforms could be substantially transformed.[22]

The EU has more modern legislation that can be used to hold companies such as Reddit accountable for CSAM and other illicit sexual content hosted and distributed on their sites. The Digital Services Act (DSA) is the legislation most closely resembling Section 230. Adopted by the European Parliament in July 2022, it took effect in October 2022. As of February 2024, the law applies to all platforms, including marketplaces, social networks, content-sharing platforms, app stores, and online travel and accommodation platforms. The goal of the DSA is to prevent illegal and harmful activities online and the spread of disinformation. It protects fundamental rights, ensures user safety, and creates a fair and open online platform environment. For citizens, it is designed to result in less exposure to illegal content, provide stronger protection of children online, and make it easier to report illegal content hosted on platforms.[23]

Under the DSA, platforms like Reddit, which host CSAM, can potentially be sued if they do not take adequate action to remove the illicit material and prevent its re-upload. This also applies to non-consensual porn and revenge porn, as the European Union has been working to criminalize various forms of cyberviolence.[24][25] Subreddits are public forums and are not considered a form of "private communication" under EU law, meaning that online communities dedicated to sharing illicit sexual content fall under the DSA's domain.

In 2023 the UK passed The Online Safety Act, which introduces new rules requiring pornography sites to verify the age of users to prevent children from viewing pornographic material. Platforms must demonstrate their commitment to removing illicit content, including

child sexual abuse, extreme sexual behavior, promotion of or facilitation of suicide, promotion of self-harm, animal cruelty, the sale of weapons or illicit substances, and terrorism. New offenses have been created, such as sending unsolicited sexual imagery online, cyber-flashing, and sharing deepfake pornography. Some platforms like WhatsApp, Signal, and iMessage have expressed concerns about accessing or viewing messages without compromising existing privacy protections for users, complicating the bill's implementation.[26] The bill cleared the House of Commons, House of Lords, and received Royal Assent in August 2024.[27]

As of December 16, 2024, the Act places new safety regulations on a range of websites, applications, and services, including social media, consumer file cloud storage, video-sharing platforms, online forums, dating services, and instant messaging services. Every site and app within the scope of this legislation has until March 16, 2025, to complete an assessment and understand the risks illegal content poses to both adults and children who use their platforms. Starting March 17, 2024, sites and applications will need to implement safety measures to mitigate those risks. These measures include better moderation, easier reporting, and built-in safety tests designed to tackle pathways used by those who groom children online. Women and girls, disproportionately affected by online harms, will benefit from measures geared to protect victims from abusers in cyberspace. The UK is prepared to use its full enforcement powers, including fining companies up to £18 million or 10% of their qualifying worldwide revenue, whichever is greater. Serious cases may result in a site being blocked in the UK. Additional measures proposed for Spring 2025 focus on blocking accounts of those found to have shared CSAM, using AI to tackle illegal harms, and implementing crisis response protocols for emergency events. The Online Safety Act will go into full effect in Summer of 2025, it will be a year of change with the final guidance for publishers of pornographic material and children's access assessments in January, draft guidance on protecting women and girls in February, and additional protections for children from harmful content in April. Some platforms will have to comply with additional requirements to protect users. Services must assess any risk to children from using their platform and set age-appropriate restrictions, protecting minors from harmful content. Age assurance technologies can be used to check people's ages online, and companies will be required to disclose what technologies, if any, are being used. Companies will no longer be able to claim their services are for users above a certain age in their terms of service while doing nothing to prevent children from accessing them. The Online Safety Act will also give Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, the powers needed to take action against all companies in scope, regardless of where they are based. Services with a significant number of UK users, or where UK users are a target market, will be under the scope of the law.[28][29] The porn industry will also be scrutinized by a dedicated reviewer, Baroness Bertin, to assess the damages it causes to individuals and society, focusing on abuse, exploitation, and trafficking.[30]

Given the extent of illicit sexual content hosted on Reddit, more must be done to hold the social media giant accountable for knowingly turning a blind eye to the issue for well over a decade. Countless victims have been traumatized as the site has routinely failed to remove content reported to the company. Communities focused on illicit sexual material are allowed to flourish while the users who share and spread the material are seldom, if ever, banned. Reddit financially benefits from hosting this material, knowing that turning a blind eye brings more users to the platform. The apathy towards the pain and suffering of those hurt by the site's lenient enforcement is heartbreaking. Over the years, many users have mentioned these problems, and the consensus among some is that the site has tried to cover it up or avoided discussion on the matter entirely. Victims deserve financial compensation for the pain endured. Reddit should not be allowed to hide behind outdated U.S. laws to avoid being held accountable while continuing to retraumatize victims and profit from material the site refuses to remove. Hopefully, the EU's Digital Services Act and the UK's Online Safety Act will begin a period of change, reshaping the digital landscape in ways that actually help victims rather than the companies that financially benefit from illicit material posted on their websites. Many on Reddit talk about evil corporations and companies, with Nestlé often being a focal point of discussion. Yet few ever discuss what is happening behind the scenes on the platform they all use.

Putting a dent in the networks responsible for uploading illicit sexual content to Reddit will be an arduous endeavor. It will require law enforcement interdiction in multiple countries, tireless work from prosecutors and cyber investigation specialists. The amount of potential arrests that may stem from an operation combating these online harms on Reddit could make Operation Broken Heart look small in contrast. Broken Heart involved 61 Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces in all 50 states, composed of over 4,500 state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies. It investigated more than 25,200 complaints of technology-facilitated crimes against children resulting in over 2,300 arrests.[31] One can only hope that in the coming years work is done to change the internet into a safer place for everyone.

Policy recommendations

To enhance user safety and comply with legal standards, Reddit should consider the following policy changes:

1. **Age Restriction:** Implement an 18+ age restriction for the entire platform if it continues to allow pornographic content. This would help ensure that minors are not exposed to adult material. If Reddit continues to allow minors (13+) to use the platform it must remove all pornographic content entirely.
2. **Content Removal and User Bans:** Enforce strict policies to remove all non-consensual porn, revenge porn, CSAM, and sex trafficking content. This includes proactive monitoring and swift action to take down such content, prevent its re-upload, and banning users who share this illicit material.
3. **Platform Moderation:** Increase investment in content moderation resources, including both automated tools and human moderators, to better identify and remove harmful content.
4. **User Reporting:** Enhance user reporting mechanisms to make it easier for users to report illegal or harmful content. Ensure that reports are reviewed promptly and that appropriate action is taken.
5. **Transparency:** Provide transparency reports detailing the actions taken to remove illegal content and the measures in place to protect users. This can help build trust with the user community and demonstrate a commitment to safety.

By implementing these recommendations, Reddit can create a safer and more responsible online environment, protecting both users and the site's reputation.

To protect victims of CSEC, CSAM, sex trafficking, revenge porn, and all forms of non-consensual porn, the U.S. should implement modernized legislation resembling the EU's Digital Services Act and the UK's Online Safety Act. This legislation should focus on protecting vulnerable groups such as children and sex workers in a harmful online landscape thriving off the exploitation of victims.

1. **Allow Victims to Sue Platforms:** Enable victims of sexual crimes to sue platforms that knowingly profit from and fail to remove sexual abuse content. This will hold platforms accountable and provide victims with a means to seek justice.
2. **Protections for Sex Workers:** Implement robust protections for sex workers to ensure their safety and well-being. Sex workers are often disproportionately affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation, making it important to protect this demographic through effective legislation.
3. **Modernize Legislation:** Update legislation to reflect the evolving digital landscape, ensuring it addresses current and emerging online harms. The U.S. could adopt a regulatory framework similar to the UK's Ofcom, which has the authority to take action against companies that violate online safety regulations. This could include significant fines and, in extreme cases, blocking access to non-compliant sites.
4. **Equip Law Enforcement:** Provide law enforcement with the necessary tools and resources to effectively combat harmful online sexual abuse in all forms. The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) should conduct regular audits of all agencies and departments to ensure that cases are properly investigated with appropriate action taken to protect victims.
5. **Prevent Sexploitation and Blackmail:** Implement comprehensive measures to prevent sexploitation and blackmail, protecting vulnerable individuals such as minors and LGBTQ+ persons from these threats in cyberspace. While both are already illegal, more can be done to address this issue.

By implementing these measures, the U.S. can create a safer online environment for all users, particularly vulnerable populations such as children, sex workers, and LGBTQ+ persons.

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About the author: I hold accredited certifications in the fundamentals of intelligence work, covering intelligence direction, collection, processing, analysis, and dissemination. I embarked on this research project to help victims of sex crimes posted on Reddit find justice and closure. My drive to help victims stems from my own experience as a victim of sexual crimes, knowing firsthand the pain they endure. As a former sex worker, I have witnessed the abuse within the sex industry and understand what it feels like to be voiceless. While, to my knowledge, no images or videos of myself have been uploaded without consent to Reddit, users traumatized me by mocking my experiences in the sex industry. This compels me to ensure that victims who have had their images and videos shared without consent, and those who have endured similar experiences to myself, can find a voice in a world determined to silence them. The toxic nature of social media platforms can leave deep psychological scars, resulting in lifelong trauma. It is time these problems were properly addressed, it may save lives given the all-too-real suicidal ideations and attempts that come with sexual trauma. In this dangerous online landscape, one either stands with or against victims. I refuse to do the latter. I am currently permanently banned from Reddit due to my harsh tone against incels, child abusers, and rapists.

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