



## Part one

# Protection of Minors on the Online Space – the National Effort

### Background

To address the risks inherent in the online space (Internet) for children and youth, in 2016, the Government decided to establish the National Child Online Protection Bureau (the National Bureau). The National Bureau was established in 2018 as a combined police and civilian array dealing with Internet violence and crime against children and youth. The Israel Police, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs participate, with the guidance of the Ministry of Justice. The Bureau comprises a police unit (Unit 105), which includes an intelligence division and an investigations division; the 105 Hotline staffed by police alongside representatives of the government mentioned above ministries; and a civilian department coordinating all of the civilian activity. Various government ministries and other entities work alongside the National Bureau regarding the prevention, treatment, and enforcement of protecting children and youth on the Internet.



## Key figures

**85.5%**

of students in grades 6–12 own a smartphone<sup>1</sup>

**about 4 hours**

average daily smartphone use among children and youth<sup>2</sup>

**28,623**

incidents of harm to minors on the Internet were reported to the 105 Hotline from February 2018 to June 2021

**11.5%**

of students in grades 6, 8, and 10–12 in Israel were victims of Internet bullying, according to an international survey conducted in 2019.<sup>3</sup> (I.e., an estimation of about 75,000 students were victims of Internet bullying in the two months preceding the survey)

**2,602**

investigation files were opened due to Internet offenses in which the victim was a minor from 2018 to August 2021. Considerable rate (70%) were closed

**1,216**

investigation files were opened due to Internet sexual offenses in which the victim was a minor from 2016 to September 2021. Half of them were closed. About half (47%) of the victims in these cases were 12–14 years old

**in 32%**

of cases opened due to Internet sexual offenses, at least one victim was a minor

**25%**

of the victims in violations of the Videos Law cases are minors

**1,498**

pictures or video dissemination complaints were received at the 105 Hotline until September 2021. Most of the perpetrators and victims were 13–17 years old

1 Yossi Harel-Fisch, Noa Steinmetz, Riki Tesler, Rotem Maor, Meyran Boniel-Nissim, Sophie Walsh, "Youth in Israel: Patterns of Use of Addictive Substances, Involvement in Violence and Internet Violence, the National HBSC Study in Israel (2019) – Summary of Expanded Findings in the Areas of the Ministry of Public Security, Analysis of Trends between 1994 and 2019, and International Comparison," Bar-Ilan University, 2020 HBSC Survey).

Health Behaviors in School Aged Children (HBSC) A World Health Organization Cross-National Study.

2 Parent survey conducted by the Office of the State Comptroller in July 2021.

3 HBSC survey.



## Key findings

- Lack of a national policy** – the international entities that deal with the issue and the 2016 government decision assert the need to formulate a national policy effectively contending with the challenges regarding the protection of minors on the Internet. As of October 2021, the inter-ministry steering committee had not yet formulated a national policy. With no policy defining national objectives, determining areas of activity and clear targets for each of the stakeholders operating in the field, defining the target audiences to work with, and addressing the resources and budgets necessary for implementing it in the short and long term – the ability to address the issue optimally is undermined.
- Introduction to the 105 Hotline** – by an HBSC survey from 2019 most children and youth harmed on the Internet (70%) did not report it. By the Ministry of Public Security survey in 2019, a significant percentage of the participated youth (41%) had not heard of the Hotline. By the State Comptroller Office survey among parents in July 2021, 51% of parents who participated in the survey had not heard of the Hotline.
- Service in the Arabic language** – one in ten calls to the 105 Hotline is in Arabic. Among them – are calls related to the dissemination of pictures and videos of a sexual nature or those that might harm the minor due to photographs not compatible with dress or behavioral patterns in conservative societies. As of August 2021, there were no Arabic-speaking police officers at the Hotline. To handle these calls, the Hotline received the help of a representative of the Ministry of Education and Arabic-speaking police officers from other districts who volunteered to help. As of November 2021, a police officer who underwent several months of Arabic language training is serving at the Hotline. These solutions are not optimal.
- Online contact** – children and youth are active on the Internet and usually communicate using various applications (such as chat and WhatsApp). By the survey, about 45% of them preferred to complain against Internet abuse cases through online means. Nevertheless, as of November 2021, the only way to reach the Hotline is by phone.
- Lack of data on calls referred by the Hotline to be handled by police stations** – 56% of the Hotline calls are classified as criminal incidents. These incidents are usually referred to be handled by police stations. It was found that neither the Hotline, the National Bureau, nor the police had data on the number of calls referred by the 105 Hotline to police stations over the years.
- Effectiveness assessment of the Hotline enforcement activities** – the Hotline locates suspects and issues warrants to help the police stations handle the investigation files. It was found that the Hotline does not receive systematic and



organized feedback from the stations regarding calls about Internet offenses against minors it has referred to them (for example – if a criminal case is opened or has been closed, and if so – on what grounds, and what difficulties the investigators encountered).

**📌 Comparing the investigation files opened at the stations with those opened following a call to the 105 Hotline** – the State Comptroller Office received from the 105 Hotline a partial list of the calls it had referred to police stations and analyzed their handling at the stations. The analysis indicates a need to thoroughly examine the effectiveness of the Hotline enforcement activities, as well as the stations' difficulties handling Internet-related files:

- **Lack of a criminal offense** – about a quarter of the investigation files opened at the stations following calls to the 105 Hotline (441 out of 1,704) were classified by them as "general cases" and were closed as they did not include a criminal offense. This is even though the stations opened them following an initial examination by a police officer at the 105 Hotline. Therefore, it raises a concern that a criminal offense was committed.
- **An almost identical percentage of cases closed – 71%-72%** – notwithstanding preliminary actions at the 105 Hotline, the rate of cases closed is almost identical between cases where the complaint is received directly at the station and those that followed a call to the Hotline (72.3% vs. 71%). Nevertheless, there are differences in the grounds for closing them – the percentage of cases closed on the grounds of "unknown offender" is lower in cases originating in calls to 105 (about 34% compared to 51%).

**📌 The technological systems at the 105 Hotline** – for about three years, the 105 Hotline has been operated using inadequate technological systems. As a result, the handling quality of incidents is affected, it is challenging to supervise and monitor the handling of incidents, and there is a constant concern about mishaps. It was found that only in August 2020; NIS 2.7 million was transferred to develop the technological systems adapting them to the 105 Hotline's activity.

**📌 Filtering harmful content** – the provisions of the law require Internet access providers to inform their subscribers of dangerous websites and content and offer them a filtering service at no cost. Supervision by the Ministry of Communications raised that the companies usually did not fulfill this obligation (80%-100%). Furthermore, by a survey conducted by the State Comptroller's Office among parents in July 2021, about a third of them did not know about this service.

**📌 Enforcement aspects – the lack of a situation assessment of the Internet crime scope** – it was found that despite the increase in the Internet crime scope, the enforcement bodies – the Israel Police and the State Attorney's Office – have no data to reliably estimate the online crime scope, its trends in general, regarding minors in particular. This result stems from three main reasons:



- a. **Classifying investigation files as "Internet related" by the Israel Police** – the police classifies online offense cases as "Internet related" when opened at the police station. However, many cases were classified incorrectly, affecting the police's ability to identify processes and phenomena in online crime. For example, out of 1,263 cases originating at the 105 hotline, 502 (40% of the cases) were not classified at the stations as "Internet related" even though that is the Hotline focus.
  - b. **Not classifying cases as "Internet related" by the State Attorney's Office** – it was found that the State Attorney's Office's computer systems, had no field that deals with committing an offense in the Internet. As a result, it is impossible to retrieve automatically data from the Office's systems on cases opened due to online offenses<sup>4</sup> and indictments filed about them.
  - c. **Lack of information on victims who are minors in the State Attorney's Office's systems** – it was found that it is impossible to retrieve exhaustive or reliable data from the State Attorney's Office's systems on the minors victims' number in general and on those harmed online in particular.
- Examining the police handling of a list of Internet pedophilia suspects** – in 2019, the police compiled a list on 190 potential suspects of being involved in committing Internet pedophilia offenses based on the information that the police had; the suspects were classified according to their dangerousness. In February 2020, the list was distributed to all units at the police. Since the distribution, the police have not dealt with 31 suspects (out of 108 suspects classified as the most dangerous) overtly or covertly, even though they were classified at the highest level of dangerousness.
- Dissemination of sexual pictures and videos of a person without consent – the Videos Law – awareness among youth** – many youths are seriously harmed by the dissemination of photos and videos of a sexual nature. By the Videos Law, committing such harm is a criminal offense, and thus youths can find themselves breaking the law, with all this entails. Surveys indicate that many of them (about a third) are unaware of the law.
- Gaps at the police stations** – the expansion of crime to the Internet pose significant challenges to law enforcement bodies, including exhausting digital evidence. Difficulties were found in the technology arena units<sup>5</sup> activity, such as the increasing strain on technology arena investigators, obligated to serve all the station investigations; a lack of unloading stations to produce digital evidence at the station – both resulting in "traffic jams" and delays. This problem is accentuated given the enormous memory capacities each device has today, which prolongs the time needed for unloading and

4 Except in cases involving a specific offense category that relates to online activity.

5 Technology arena rooms in which trained investigators are stationed whose job is to help produce digital evidence – such as photos, videos, messages and correspondence – that are caught in digital devices such as computers, tablets, smartphone and cameras.



producing the evidence; this tremendous amount of digital evidence requires special storage and analysis taking a long time, given the significant amount of information accumulated. These difficulties cause delays in handling all investigation files, including those involving online offenses against minors.





In addition, gaps were found regarding the ability of youth units at the stations to address online youth crime. Among other things, by the police documents, youth investigators are unfamiliar with the language of the investigated children and insufficiently familiar with the online space. They cannot investigate cases that demand many resources and technological skills.



**The National Bureau – the 105 Hotline** – the National Bureau is a unique model in Israel and worldwide. Cooperation between the police and representatives of the various government ministries enables holistically addressing harm to children and youth on the Internet. Naturally, this model is challenging and demands coping with complexities that stem from working side by side to workers from different organizational cultures and employment conditions. It requires solutions on the hierarchical level within the work model. The National Bureau has contended with its challenges, and constant consideration is needed to ensure optimal performance within this model.





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## Key recommendations

-  It is recommended that the inter-ministry steering committee formulate of a long-term national policy. Setting out a policy guiding the many stakeholders involved, including the National Bureau, the Israel Police, and the various government ministries, will optimally address its inherent challenges, chiefly those defined in the threat reference. This policy will be examined from time to time considering technological developments and changes in the risk map.
-  For Internet abuse victims to contact the Hotline, they must be aware of its existence. It is recommended to further invest in publicity efforts and consider the most effective ways to raise awareness of its activity.
-  It is recommended that the Israel Police and 105 Hotline examine in depth why the percentage of cases closed at the stations is identical (about 70%), whether the complaint was received directly at the station, or whether it followed a call to the Hotline.
-  The 105 Hotline began operating in 2018 and has handled over 28,000 calls since then. The 105 Hotline model is unique. To evaluate the service the Hotline provides and its



effectiveness by the callers' part and to improve its activity, it is essential to receive feedback from the public regarding its service. It is recommended that the National Bureau receive such feedback.

-  To enable a reliable situation assessment of online crime and to derive insights from it, it is recommended that the Israel Police and the State Attorney's Office examine how to improve the classification of cases in which offenses have been committed online.
-  Given the high level of dangerousness determined regarding 31 suspects included in the pedophilia list the police compiled, the police should investigate the suspicions, overtly or covertly, regarding all of the suspects, and in particular, those the police defined as a high level of dangerousness, alongside its handling of other suspects. Furthermore, it is recommended that the police periodically follow up on the issue with the various police units to ensure maximum police attention towards suspects of pedophilia at the most severe level. It is also recommended that the police consider implementing continued follow-up in the coming years.
-  The Ministry of Education should increase awareness of the Videos Law and its consequences and consider including it in the curriculum. In particular, it should be a mandatory topic in middle schools. Given the severe harm to the person whose photo has been disseminated to the public without consent, the Ministry of Education should emphasize to youth that alongside their right to send photos and videos of themselves to others, they must be aware their photos might be disseminated to others and their control over the photos will be lost.
-  Investigative bodies face significant technological challenges when fully utilizing digital evidence, affecting the conduct of investigations in the online space; these will intensify as technology develops and as online crime increases. These challenges require suitable technological response enabling complete, optimal, and quick utilization of digital resources. The Israel Police should consider the difficulties regarding the activity of the technology arena rooms at the stations and examine the unique needs and response to bridge the technological gaps that hamper investigative activities. This is underlined as fully utilizing digital evidence is necessary today in many investigation files, not just to online crime.



**Statements that were made in a dialogue with National Council of Students and Youth representatives**

There is almost no one who has not **experienced sexual harassment**, both boys and girls – it crosses sectors and sexes • **No one** has not **experienced sexual abuse** in the virtual realm, and many times, there is no knowledge about how to cope with it • Even if I block a harasser, **a week later, another harasser will come** • **There are not enough tools to cope with it** • I am exposed to **shocking videos** on the internet • **Spending a lot of time on the Internet** • Children's time in front of a screen exposes them to harmful content • Prolonged use of the internet is essentially an addiction • There is a lot of **impersonation** on the internet and even **faking conversations** of a harmful or sexual nature • Gambling on the internet by youth • We have all encountered and know youth who have been harmed • In your immediate environment, within 5-10 minutes, you can get **cannabis and alcohol**, and the internet has made it highly available and accessible • **Ostracism on the internet** reaches more people and stays in the virtual space for a long time • You can put photos there, and anyone can be anonymous and write what they want • **Ostracism on the internet is much crueler**, and it stays there • **Advertisements with thin women and tall men hurt self-confidence** • **High exposure to drugs on social networks**





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## Summary

The online space offers abundant opportunities for children and youth, but, the more they are exposed to a wider variety of uses and options, the more they are exposed to risks and harm inherent in the online space. These harmful consequences can be severe and affect the victims for many years.

The National Bureau is a unique combined civilian-police array providing a holistic response to Internet abuse of children and youth. The police and government ministry representatives at the National Bureau, particularly at the Hotline and in the operational unit, work out of a sense of mission, and are exposed to sensitive information, which requires emotional resilience. Establishing the National Bureau is a significant step in addressing the issue. Still, additional measures are necessary to cope with the Internet's challenges, with its constantly changing risk map.

This report presents a series of gaps, including the lack of a national policy for the protection of children and youth on the Internet; the absence of a situation assessment on online crime scope; gaps in the civilian and law-enforcement Hotline activities; and gaps in the police stations' handling of online offenses. Addressing these gaps will improve the national effort to protect children and youth on the Internet.

Many entities are involved in the Protection of minors online – children and youth and their parents, the National Child Online Protection Bureau, the formal education system, informal education, law enforcement, and relevant government ministries, including the Ministry of Education and online platforms and third sector organizations. Every solution concerning the responsibility of one entity in this complex equation will ultimately be partial and insufficient. Addressing online risks requires broad action on the national level, including handling aspects of education and prevention, treatment and enforcement, and enlisting all relevant stakeholders in coordinated action on this important issue.



In a work model where several government ministries work shoulder-to-shoulder to provide a holistic solution, there are significant advantages for coping with problems across ministries. It is also worth examining the implementation of this model in other areas in which there is a clear advantage in joint handling by staff from different ministries.