OFFICE *of* INTELLIGENCE *and* ANALYSIS

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# Online Recruitment of Child Sex Trafficking Becoming Endemic

Human traffickers increasingly use online extortion campaigns to coerce vulnerable children into commercial sex work. In 2025, reports of online enticement toward children rose to nearly 520,000, roughly 80 percent higher than the year before, according to data from the CyberTipline of the US government-supported nonprofit, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). With 96 percent of US teens reportedly using the internet daily, traffickers exploit social media, video games, encrypted messaging apps, dating apps, and, increasingly, artificial intelligence (AI) to identify and manipulate victims. The NCMEC CyberTipline reported an over 60-fold increase in the use of generative AI in child sexual exploitation cases in 2025 compared to the year before. In September 2025, an individual in Indiana pled guilty to using social media and AI to extort 68 minors before sexually trafficking at least 5 of these victims.

*The following represents the typical life cycle of a sex trafficking operation targeting a minor through an online video game.*

### Identify Victim
Traffickers identify potential victims in multiplayer online games, seeking to make initial contact with vulnerable children who appear to be isolated, seeking validation, or showing signs of family problems.

**1**

### Establish Relationship
Aspiring traffickers build a friendship or romantic relationship with the victim and learn more about their pattern of life, establishing trust based on shared interests.

**2**

### Encrypted Messaging
The trafficker then suggests moving to private—often encrypted—communication platforms that allow traffickers to speak with victims while avoiding monitoring by game moderators.

**3**

### Victim Isolation
The trafficker attempts to isolate the victim and create a dependent relationship by driving a wedge between the victim and their families or support networks.

**4**

### Grooming/Sextortion
Traffickers then attempt to groom and manipulate the victim, often requesting sexual content, which may lead to blackmail and increased control over the victim—also known as sextortion.
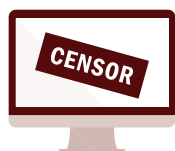
**5**

### Establish Control
As control is established, the trafficker will persuade the victim to meet in person using a combination of promises and threats.

**6**

### Meet in Person
Once the trafficker meets the victim, they will often transport them away from their support network and then force them to engage in commercial sex acts through force, fraud, or coercion.

**7**

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