The New 'Face' of Exploitation:

It could be yours (or, more concerningly, your child's)

By: Mackenzie Holian

Imagine opening social media to find your face, or your child's face, attached to a sexually explicit image that never actually existed. Perhaps it is an old family photo pulled from Facebook, a school picture from middle school, or a smiling snapshot from a birthday party. Within minutes, freely available artificial intelligence tools can transform that innocent image into something that looks disturbingly real.

This is the new face of sexual exploitation. Once associated with celebrities and politicians, AI-generated explicit imagery is increasingly targeting ordinary people, including children.

The technology is now fast, cheap, and widely accessible, allowing virtually anyone with a photograph to create convincing explicit images without a person's knowledge or consent. AI has fundamentally changed what sexual exploitation looks like.

So what exactly are we talking about?

Although AI-generated explicit imagery can target anyone, children are increasingly its primary victims. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) defines AI-generated child sexual abuse material (AI CSAM) as "the umbrella term for image or video content depicting child sexual abuse material... that has been created with assistance from, or entirely by, generative AI systems."

The most concerning variation of this is morphed, or non-consensual, AI-generated imagery in which a person's face or likeness is digitally inserted into sexually explicit material. As the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) explains, these images often originate from "innocent photos—from social media, school yearbooks, or even family photos—that are manipulated using AI tools. Predators can create CSAM without ever meeting the child in person." In other words, any photograph shared online, even one that seems completely harmless, can become the raw material for exploitation.

A Growing Threat

The scale of the problem is growing at an astonishing pace. According to the IWF, it identified 3,443 AI-generated child sexual abuse videos in a single year; an increase of 26,385% from the previous year, when just 13 such videos were recorded. What was once a niche is now widely accessible.

A major reason is the rise of AI-powered "undressing" applications, or Nudify apps, which allow users to upload a fully clothed photograph and generate an artificial nude image. Marketed as entertainment, many have become tools for sexual exploitation, especially in schools as a bullying tactic. Troublingly, research found that only seven of the twenty most popular platforms verified subjects were adults, and fewer than half meaningfully addressed consent. As these tools proliferate, the barriers to creating exploitative content continue to disappear.

Why This Matters

For many people, AI-generated explicit imagery still sounds futuristic. For those working with children every day, it is anything but. They say it is already reshaping the cases coming through their offices.

"It's just blowing up," one Assistant District Attorney told me. "Technology... [is now] involved in every single thing because everybody is using their phones and there's just so much information that could be gathered. Especially kids, with their phones or . . . being online or all these different gaming platforms that kids are using like Roblox."

Child exploitation coordinators are seeing the same trend. "I would say probably 60% of my cases are digital," explained a New England Child Sexual Exploitation Coordinator (CSEC). "Especially during the school year. We get sextortion all the time. We get youth misusing social media all the time."

Yet, the legal system has struggled to keep pace. One mental health clinician who works with child victims described the frustration many families experience after reporting AI-generated abuse. "Right now, in the state of Massachusetts, you can't prosecute for AI-generated porn," she said. "We've seen a lot of upset parents when images are being created, but they're not created in the way that the law is written [to prohibit] right now. So putting a child's head on a body is not necessarily being considered a crime right now."

The challenge extends beyond criminal law. Even when exploitative images are identified, online platforms are not always required to remove them quickly or prevent them from being reshared, allowing harmful content to spread long after it is first created.

That is why many advocates argue the conversation cannot stop with criminal prosecutions. As the HEAT Initiative puts it, the internet has reached a point where it is not yet "good business to protect children online." Instead, they argue, policymakers must "make it bad business to harm children online." Until technology companies face meaningful consequences for enabling or profiting from exploitative content, the incentives remain dangerously misaligned.

A Final Thought

This is not meant to fearmonger. It is meant to make us think more carefully about what we post online, and how our children use technology.

As the CSEC coordinator told me, "It happens all the time, and it happens in every community. With online things, truly, no one is safe from it. We have had FBI agents' kids be victims of sextortion. It is affecting everyone, and it's not just . . . a [small] percentage of the population. It is truly any person."

That is the uncomfortable reality of AI-powered exploitation. A single photo posted online, one accepted friend request, one direct message, or one click can have consequences that last far beyond the moment it was shared. As NCMEC reminds us, "when these files are shared across the internet, child victims suffer re-victimization each time the image of their sexual abuse is viewed." For many victims, the trauma is not only knowing the image exists, but never knowing who has seen it, or who may see it next.

The good news is that many of the most effective protections are also the simplest, and the advice is straightforward: “Make everything private. And only talk to people you know. Don’t accept followers from strangers. Don't let people slide into your DMs” (New England CSEC Coordinator). She reminded me that parents should closely monitor the apps their children use, remembering that even games and seemingly harmless platforms often include chat features that allow strangers to initiate conversations.

In an era where AI can transform an ordinary photograph into a weapon of exploitation in seconds, digital safety is no longer just about protecting our devices. It is about protecting ourselves and our children.

For more information on non-consensual inauthentic material, click here.

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