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Vermont Intelligence Center | | Situational Awareness Report

(FOUO) Situation Report: COVID-19 Impact to Child Abuse, Domestic Abuse and Child Exploitation

(FOUO) Executive Summary

(FOUO) Regulations put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 are impacting families not only throughout Vermont but across the world. These regulations, such as Vermont’s “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order and school closures are leaving children at home for longer periods often with access to the internet. Additionally, worldwide incidents of domestic abuse are reportedly surging. **The Vermont Intelligence Center assesses with moderate confidence the measures enacted to combat COVID-19 may increase the potential for child abuse, domestic abuse, and may increase the likelihood of potential child exploitation.**

(U) Potential to Domestic and Child Abuse

(U) The United Nations indicated concern that reports of domestic violence around the world has increased.¹ France reported a nationwide spike of 30% for domestic violence while Spain reported an 18% increase.³ It is anticipated the increases reported in other countries may translate to similar increases in the United States. Vermont’s “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order combined with the cancellation of schools for the remainder of the year is similar to measures taken in other countries reporting spikes in domestic violence calls.

(U) Child welfare experts are concerned about three conditions which may further stress families and lead to an increase of violence. The first condition is routines being disrupted causing individuals to be in close quarters and increasing the amount of time spent together. This time may have increased stress due to demands of work or bills and children may act out under the stress of their routines being disrupted. The second condition is the decrease in jobs and increase in unemployment claims which leads to more household strain due to debt and economic insecurity. The final condition specific to children is isolation from those who care. Children are no longer going to school and being seen by teachers, staff, and fellow students which can help catch children who are being mistreated.¹

(U) In the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline reports that a growing number of callers indicate their abusers are using COVID-19 as a means of isolating them further from friends and family and threatening to “throw their victims out on the street so they get sick”.² **The VIC assesses with high confidence that the calls for law enforcement to respond to incidents of domestic abuse or child abuse may increase.** Teachers and school staff that have regular contact with children through online learning platforms or other means are encouraged to be aware if something doesn’t seem right with a child. Any individual having contact with a child or individual where abuse is suspected, is strongly encouraged to contact their local law enforcement agency.

(U) School Closings Present Increased Risk of Child Exploitation

(U) On March 24, 2020 the Vermont Governor Phil Scott amended an Executive Order issued March 17 dismissing school for the remainder of the year. This order indicated that schools will implement remote learning on or before April 13, 2020 for the remainder of the school year.⁴ **Based on this order, the VIC**

assesses with moderate confidence that children will have an increased risk of child exploitation due to the increase in online presence both the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order and the closure of in-person education in Vermont.

(U) Due to the number of school closings both in Vermont and nationwide, the FBI has released information pertaining to the increase of an online presence for children and the dangers of online sexual exploitation. Sexual offenders may attempt to exploit victims in many ways, such as, providing explicit images of themselves, or coercing victims into providing sexually explicit images. Offenders will often make casual contact with children online, gain their trust and then introduce sexual conversations that increase over time often resulting in the exchange of illicit images to an eventual meeting.⁵

(U) In order to stop the victimization, children typically need to come forward to a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher or law enforcement. **While embarrassment is often the biggest barrier of reporting exploitation to adults, adults that have regular contact can watch for changes in behavior such as an increase in nightmares, withdrawn behavior, angry outbursts, anxiety, depression sexual knowledge or not wanting to be left alone with an individual.** Additionally, preventative steps can assist in reducing child exploitation. These steps may include discussing internet safety, reviewing and approving games or other downloads, setting strong privacy policy and monitoring use of the internet. To read additional recommendations for reducing sexual exploitation, please click here.⁵ Any individual suspecting child abuse, domestic abuse, or child exploitation is encouraged to contact their local law enforcement agency.

(U) Sources

1 (FOUO) Santhanam, Laura. “Why Child Welfare Experts Fear A Spike of Abuse During COVID-19”. *PBS Newshour*. CISA. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/why-child-welfare-experts-fear-a-spike-of-abuse-during-covid-19>. Accessed April 8, 2020.

2 (U) Godin, Melissa. “As Cities Around the World Go on Lockdown, Victims of Domestic Violence Look for a Way Out”. *Time*. <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>. Accessed on April 8, 2020.

3 (U) Taub, Amanda. “A New COVID-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>. Accessed on April 8, 2020.

4 (U) Scott, Phil. “State of Vermont: Executive Department: Gubernatorial Directive to All School Boards and Superintendents and Child Care Providers”. <https://governor.vermont.gov/sites/scott/files/documents/Directive%205%20-%20Continuity%20of%20Learning%20Planning%200.pdf>. Accessed on April 8, 2020.

5 (U) FBI. “School Closings Due to COVID-19 Present Potential for Increased Risk of Child Exploitation”. *Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Press Office*. https://www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation/layout_view. Accessed on April 8, 2020.