# National Crime Agency raises alarm over disturbing online 'Com networks' involving teenage boys



The National Crime Agency (NCA) has raised alarms regarding the emergence of disturbing online groups comprising teenage boys, referred to as ‘Com networks.’ The agency has identified these networks as orchestrators of severe abuse, blackmail, and exploitation, primarily targeting vulnerable young girls. In a report published yesterday, the NCA revealed a dramatic six-fold increase in reports of such activities over the past two years, indicating a serious and widespread issue affecting thousands of victims and perpetrators.

Graeme Biggar, the NCA's director general, characterises these gangs as the "online equivalent of urban street gangs." According to the report, members of these networks are predominantly young men driven by a desire for status, power, control, and an obsession with violent or extreme content. The networks engage in 'sextortion,' wherein perpetrators manipulate victims into performing sexual acts or self-harm in exchange for monetary gain or social media notoriety.

The data indicates that the scope of these networks is expansive, with estimates suggesting that thousands of teenage boys actively participate. However, the NCA acknowledges that the prevalence of these crimes is likely under-reported. James Babbage, the NCA's director general of threats, points to cultural influences in media, such as the Netflix drama 'Adolescence,' which showcases the impact of online interactions on youth. He noted, “For me, the Netflix show Adolescence does a great job of highlighting just how much of an impact these online conversations, even simple emojis, have on young people’s lives and their self-esteem.”

The report highlights a fundamental shift in the demographic of offenders: whereas such crimes were once predominantly carried out by adults against children, the dynamics have shifted, with young people now perpetrating these acts against their peers. Recent cases, such as that of Richard Ehiemere from east London, illustrate the dangers; Ehiemere was convicted for his involvement with CVLT, a notorious online group that coerced girls through threats of disseminating personal information unless they provided intimate images.

Babbage further explained that perpetrators often seek out individuals with vulnerabilities, particularly those involved in online communities related to mental health issues. Grooming techniques employed by offenders can leave victims unaware of their victimisation, resulting in a lack of trust in adults and reluctance to report the abuse.

The NCA’s National Strategic Assessment described these networks as platforms that perpetuate harmful content and extremist ideologies. As stated in the report, “Extreme and illicit imagery depicting violence, gore and child sexual abuse material is frequently shared amongst users, normalising and desensitising participants to increasingly extreme content and behaviours.” Victims are manipulated into abuse and self-harm through extreme coercion, with some being encouraged to harm not only themselves but also family pets.

The report underscores a troubling trend, suggesting that the content and interaction on these platforms may lead some individuals, particularly younger users, to develop a predilection for extreme violence. According to Biggar, “This is a hugely complex and deeply concerning phenomenon. Young people are being drawn into these sadistic and violent online gangs where they are collaborating at scale to inflict, or incite others to commit, serious harm.”

“Com networks” are known to operate on popular encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Discord, platforms widely used by young people. The chief executive of the Molly Rose Foundation, Andy Burrows, has urged the government and regulator Ofcom to take decisive measures to tackle the spread of extreme online material. The NCA continues to emphasise the risks these networks pose, especially to young girls who are frequently the targets of such exploitation.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-crime-agency-annual-report-and-accounts-2023-to-2024> - This document provides an overview of the National Crime Agency's activities, including their efforts to combat serious and organized crime, which could include online abuse and exploitation. It underscores the agency's commitment to addressing emerging threats.
* <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64ccdcfe995827000dc1e90b/National_Crime_Agency_Annual_Report_2022-23_-_web_accessible_version.pdf> - This report highlights the NCA's work in disrupting and investigating serious crimes, including those involving online platforms. It supports the agency's focus on complex, modern threats.
* <https://www.ic3.gov/AnnualReport/Reports/2023_IC3Report.pdf> - This report details cybercrime trends, including online exploitation and abuse. It provides context on the scale of online threats and the challenges in addressing them.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-crime-agency> - This website offers general information about the NCA's mission and roles in combating serious and organised crime, which may include the types of online abuse mentioned.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64575013> - This article discusses recent trends in online crime and youth involvement, aligning with the NCA's concerns about the rise of 'Com networks' and their impact.