

Prepared Remarks of
Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales
at the
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)
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Good morning. I want to thank you for having me here at the National Center to talk with you and with the American people about the protection of our kids from exploitation over the Internet.

My wife Rebecca and I toured this facility and met with many of you last July. We were inspired by all that the people of the National Center do to protect children. Your unyielding efforts are critical to law enforcement and a lifeline to parents, and I am deeply grateful for the relationship we at the Justice Department have with you.

What struck Rebecca and me the most during our visit, and I see it again today in your eyes, is the level of dedication you show to the National Center's cause and its work. I know it's not easy. To all of you striving to safeguard our children, I want to give you my personal thanks. No cause could be more courageous or more noble.

As you know, there has been a great deal of attention focused on child exploitation issues lately, in the press and by Congress. That is a good thing – the welfare of our children is worthy of debate and examination.

Most of you here, of course, are painfully aware of how widespread the threat is of pedophiles preying on children online, or abusing kids and sending images of the abuse around the world through the Internet. The threat is frighteningly real ... it is growing rapidly, and it must be stopped.

The National Center has done a remarkable job in raising our awareness about the dangers of child sexual abuse, enticement, and pornography. Yet, I think many people still don't appreciate the scope, the nature and the import of this criminal activity, and the threat it poses to our kids.

To educate people about this threat, I am going to describe some of the criminal evidence we have seized. It is graphic, but if we do not talk candidly, then it is easy for people to turn away and worry about other matters. I think it is time to deliver a wake-up call about the true nature and scope of this criminal activity – the depth of the depravity and the harm being inflicted upon innocent children.

I have seen pictures of older men forcing naked young girls to have anal sex. There are videos on the Internet of very young daughters forced to have intercourse and oral sex with their fathers. Viewing this was shocking and it makes my stomach turn. But while these descriptions may make some uncomfortable, we will not defeat this threat unless we all really understand the nature of the child pornography prevalent on the Internet.

As the chief law enforcement officer of the United States, my job is to investigate and prosecute crimes against our children. Changes in technology have made that much more difficult. And of course privacy rights must always be accommodated and protected as we conduct our investigations. But I fear that if we do not do more – if parents, community, business, civic, industry, and political leaders do not work better together, then we will lose this fight on behalf of our children. And so today my message to the American people focuses on two categories of cases: sexual enticement of minors and child pornography.

As you know, enticement cases are those where predators contact kids in chat rooms or through networking sites and arrange to meet in person—with the purpose of making sexual contact.

We've watched as investigative journalists have posed as teens in chat rooms. With great ease, they have lured priests, teachers, doctors, and lawyers, all of whom thought they were going to have sexual contact with children. And we've seen news coverage of high-profile arrests in sting operations.

Of course, the National Center and law enforcement have been focused on identifying, investigating, and prosecuting these offenders for some time. But I welcome the media's recent focus. It's important that the public learns how serious and widespread this threat actually is in America today because of the ease and anonymity of communication over the Internet.

According to one study, one child in every five is solicited online. The television program "Dateline" estimated that,

at any given time, 50,000 predators are on the Internet prowling for children. It is simply astonishing how many predators there are, and how aggressively they act.

Educating the public about the enticement threat is especially critical because of the role that parents can play in making sure their children use the Internet safely. It may sound trite, but parents have to be the first line of defense. And I know the National Center works hard to inform parents and kids about online dangers.

Another major type of child exploitation case involves the production, distribution, or possession of child pornography. And this is the area where I am most concerned that people fail to recognize the magnitude of the problem and its impact on children in our society.

To many people, when you mention the term “child pornography,” they think of distasteful, but somewhat benign, pictures. Maybe a photograph of a partially nude teenager in a suggestive pose. To them, child pornography is different from the adult pornography that the Supreme Court has said gets First Amendment protection—but only by degree. And they might even add the well-worn notion that child pornography is a victimless crime.

For starters, let’s be clear: it is not a victimless crime. Most images today of child pornography depict actual sexual abuse of real children. Each image literally documents a crime scene.

There is nothing mild or benign about child pornography, either. That was true decades ago, when the Supreme Court ruled that child pornography is not entitled to any protection under the First Amendment. And it is certainly true today, where the vast majority of images being produced are far more sinister.

I have already talked about some of the images I have seen at the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the Justice Department. But there are even more shocking and vulgar images we’ve uncovered. We’re talking about a young toddler, tied up with towels, desperately crying in pain while she is being brutally raped and sodomized by an adult man. Another was of a mere infant being savagely penetrated.

In Operation Hamlet, a case principally investigated by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, we dismantled an international ring of people who were molesting their own children and each other’s children. They captured it all on camera, and shared the images. They even did it on web cams sometimes, so that other molesters could watch it live.

These are not just “pornographic” pictures or videos. They are images of graphic sexual and physical abuse of innocent children, even babies. We need to get the public—as well as government officials—to start thinking about it in the right terms. It is brutal, it is heinous, and it is criminal.

But understanding the problem goes beyond getting the terminology right. It used to be that child porn was tightly contained by law enforcement, with isolated pornographers relegated to small black markets in underground bookstores or secret mailings. Today, though, pedophiles can download or trade images on the web, through email, in chat rooms or newsgroups, or over peer-to-peer networks or file servers.

Sadly, the Internet age has created a vicious cycle in which child pornography continually becomes more widespread, more graphic, and more sadistic, using younger and younger children. Those in this room understand this cycle, but let me explain a bit, because having the public understand it is critical to appreciating the present state of the problem.

At the most basic level, the Internet is used as a tool for sending and receiving large amounts of child pornography on a relatively anonymous basis. But the Internet has become more than just an expanding supply of images for pedophiles to gratify their urges.

Before the Internet, these pedophiles were isolated—unwelcome even in most adult bookstores. Through the Internet, they have found a community. Offenders can bond with each other, and the Internet acts as a tool for legitimizing and validating their behavior in their minds. It emboldens them.

And this is where the Internet’s vicious cycle leads to the trends I mentioned above. The pedophiles seek to build larger collections of photographs and videos, as a license into their community. As they become de-sensitized to the images they have, they seek more graphic, more heinous, and more disturbing material.

At some point, the pedophiles meet strong incentives not just to collect images, but to produce new ones themselves.

Part of it is the desire to see novel and more graphic images, with younger and younger children. And today's technology makes it easier and less costly for anyone to produce these images and distribute them widely.

The other incentive is that trading rules in parts of this community require that participants offer new pornographic images in order to get images from fellow users. Images of sexual abuse of children become something of a currency—a way to get more pictures. Collectors become producers, and to be in the club, they have to find a child to abuse. And they are driven by the desire for increasingly graphic images.

So the Internet just feeds a vicious cycle. It makes child pornography more accessible and validates the pedophiles' behavior in their minds, driving them to molest even more children and to make new and increasingly vulgar material.

The Internet has also fundamentally changed the type of victimization that children endure. Imagine a ten-year-old boy who is sexually abused by a family member. He will always wear the scars of that tragic moment. And stopping the abuse means uprooting the family, which further affects children.

And, because of the Internet and the trends it has caused, he will continue to be victimized in other ways. Pedophiles will often use the images of children as a tool to silence them or to blackmail them into more molestation or pornography—or worse yet, into the horrific trades of child trafficking and prostitution. And the boy will always know that the pictures of his very personal abuse are out there on the Internet, which leads to feelings of embarrassment and helplessness that cause an ongoing and cruel victimization.

Another trend we are seeing is the so-called “molestation on demand,” where a pedophile molests a child and others watch live through streaming video. We saw that in the case I mentioned before, Operation Hamlet.

A variation of the on-demand abuse was in *United States v. Mariscal*. We found that Mariscal had been traveling to Cuba and Ecuador over a seven-year period, taking orders from customers to produce child porn to the customers' liking. He would allow customers to write fantasy scripts, and then he would find poverty-stricken families and pay them to allow him to sexually abuse their children, some under the age of 12. And Mariscal would make between \$600 and \$1,000 per order. To make matters worse, Mariscal was HIV-positive. We caught him and his co-conspirators, and in September 2004 he was sentenced to a 100-year prison term.

I'd like to say that these kinds of criminal behaviors are isolated or rare. Sadly, they are not. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are in the midst of an epidemic in the production and trafficking of movies and images depicting the sexual abuse of children. Now, more than ever, we need to educate the public on the realities of the dangers posed by child sexual predators, abusers, and pornographers.

The question becomes how we, as a society, will respond. There can be only one answer: we cannot, and will not, tolerate those who seek to abuse or exploit our children.

President Bush is absolutely committed to this cause. He has made my mission clear, stating, and I quote, “Anyone who targets a child for harm will be a primary target of law enforcement.”

At the Department, we are working more of these cases than ever before in the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section, in the FBI's Innocent Images Unit, and in U.S. Attorney's Offices around the country. We are funding the Internet Crimes Against Children program, a successful network of 45 task forces that I know you all work with closely. Under President Bush the funding for the ICAC program has more than doubled, to over \$14 million in fiscal year 2006.

On February 15th – following the President's directive to protect our children – I announced Project Safe Childhood, an initiative aimed at combating the online exploitation and victimization of children.

Through Project Safe Childhood, we will build on our efforts in this area by making law enforcement at all levels more coordinated, better trained, and more involved. And we will use our federal resources at the Justice Department to make sure we find these criminals and keep them away from our kids.

We are moving closer to formally implementing Project Safe Childhood, after soliciting support and suggestions from a number of people and organizations, including the National Center. I intend to announce additional details next month. It is my hope that this new program will make a real difference in the lives of Americans, and especially our children.

But in order for Project Safe Childhood to succeed, we have to make sure law enforcement has all the tools and information it needs to wage this battle. The investigation and prosecution of child predators depends critically on the availability of evidence that is often in the hands of Internet service providers. This evidence will be available for us to use only if the providers retain the records for a reasonable amount of time. Unfortunately, the failure of some Internet service providers to keep records has hampered our ability to conduct investigations in this area.

As a result, I have asked the appropriate experts at the Department to examine this issue and provide me with proposed recommendations. And I will reach out personally to the CEOs of the leading service providers, and to other industry leaders, to solicit their input and assistance. Record retention by Internet service providers consistent with the legitimate privacy rights of Americans is an issue that must be addressed.

I am also proud to announce today that the Administration will send to Congress a new piece of legislation, the Child Pornography and Obscenity Prevention Amendments of 2006. This legislation will help ensure that communications providers report the presence of child pornography on their systems by strengthening criminal penalties for failing to report it. It will also prevent people from inadvertently stumbling across pornographic images on the Internet. I hope Congress will take up this legislation promptly.

I have directed my staff to see what else we can do. But all our efforts, including Project Safe Childhood is built with the recognition that law enforcement cannot do it alone. It has to be a community effort, down to every last parent.

I can't overstate how important the National Center will be to making Project Safe Childhood a success. For decades, you all have played a central role in this fight to protect children. We will look to you for your expertise and community leadership.

Before announcing Project Safe Childhood, I spoke with your director, Ernie Allen, and asked for his help. I was very pleased that he immediately embraced the initiative wholeheartedly, and I look forward to continuing to work together as full partners.

One of the most critical parts of implementing Project Safe Childhood will be to provide the right training to investigators and prosecutors around the country. As I've discussed today, they need to better understand the scope and nature of this criminal activity, and they need to know how to work computer-based investigations and prosecutions, and how to work cooperatively on leads.

The National Center is experienced in facilitating that kind of training, and Ernie has committed to providing training in the critical early stages of the initiative. And we'll also work with our other partners that you work with and that provide ongoing training programs, like the Department-funded Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces and Fox Valley Technical College.

The National Center helps in so many other ways, too. The CyberTipline that you administer plays an essential role for law enforcement, centralizing the place for people to report crimes against children. You are also on the cutting edge of efforts to identify and rescue the kids we see being abused in pornographic images, through your Exploited Child Unit and the National Child Victim Identification Program. Project Safe Childhood will help bring together your critical efforts and the federal, state, and local law enforcement officials working in each district around the Nation.

With your help, law enforcement is working to stem the surge in child exploitation and pornography. But the scope of the problem is immense. I am therefore calling on all responsible Americans and corporate citizens—down to every last parent, teacher, and minister—to educate themselves about the problem and see how they can help out. Together, we can make our homes and our neighborhoods safer for our sons and daughters.

May God bless you and your work here, and may God bless and keep safe our children.