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Online harm skyrocketed during New Zealand's COVID-19 Lockdown

From scams to sextortion: New Zealand might have closed, but the internet did not.

The number of individuals suffering unwanted digital communications during our nationwide lockdown – encouraging people to hurt or kill themselves – increased, according to ground-breaking research by Netsafe.

Of participants in a New Zealand study who reported being a victim to at least one unwanted digital communication during the last year, 41 percent said it occurred during and/or after Lockdown.

Males (46 percent), those aged between 40 and 49 (59 percent) and New Zealand Europeans (44 percent), were most likely to have suffered.

Around six in ten people with long-term disabilities who received unwanted digital communications, did so during and/or after the Lockdown period.

Categories which attracted the largest numbers of online harm during and/or after Lockdown included encouraging people to hurt or kill themselves (65 percent), sharing intimate images or recordings without permission (65 percent), sharing violent or sexual content considered indecent or obscene (55 percent) and offensive comments about religious or political beliefs (54 percent).

Netsafe chief executive Martin Cocker said with more people at home connected than ever before, it was inevitable there would be risks and challenges associated with the unrivalled period in our nation's history.

"Digital technology helped people remain connected, but human beings aren't accustomed to being at home and inside for prolonged periods, and unfortunately, this combined to create a perfect storm for trouble online," Cocker said.

Data from Netsafe, which triages reports under the Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA), also paints a picture of how Lockdown caused online harm to increase.

When the Lockdown period was compared to the same time in 2019, it was found scam reports were up 74 percent, sextortion 35 percent, romance scams 69 percent, intimidation 45 percent and the supply and distribution of objectionable material 66 percent.

Cocker said the numbers reinforced the importance of the HDCA and Netsafe – an independent, free, non-judgemental, confidential and seven-days-a-week online safety support service.

“I am extremely proud of the way Netsafe was able to help during Lockdown, keeping people safe by providing guidance and support, education to schools and parents right across New Zealand and coordinating our efforts with government and industry to give people better online experiences.”

The demand for Netsafe’s online resources, including its Online Safety Parent Toolkit, increased by 167 percent, Cocker said. Parents seeking help via 0508 NETSAFE shot up 155 percent.

“As New Zealand make significant progress fighting COVID-19, and with people back at work and school, Netsafe remains available to everyone who needs support with online issues. Our work continues, and with this research, we will all be better informed in the event a further Lockdown occurred.”

Some types of unwanted digital communications were more likely to be sent in the three months during and/or after lockdown.

Percentage of participants receiving unwanted digital communications before, during and/or after lockdown, by type

Type of unwanted digital communication	During and/or after lockdown	Before lockdown	Not sure/ can't remember
Physically threatened or intimidated you	53%	32%	21%
Excluded you from a peer or friendship group	48%	37%	22%
Tried to embarrass or humiliate you online in front of your peers or friends	45%	46%	18%
Said offensive things about you, your lifestyle or your religious or political beliefs	54%	41%	16%
Included violent or sexual content you thought was indecent or obscene	55%	44%	24%
Made a false allegation about your personal or professional life	43%	51%	15%
Was just one of many unwanted communications received from the same person	44%	35%	29%
Made an unwanted sexual advance to you	53%	42%	16%
Stalked you by monitoring your online activity to intimidate or control you	52%	50%	10%
Shared intimate images or recordings of you without your permission	65%	34%	15%
Came from people that had been encouraged by someone else to try to harm you	55%	50%	10%
Tried to get you to hurt yourself	65%	45%	8%
Was harmful in another way	54%	49%	11%

Base: Participants that received at least one unwanted digital communication in the last 12 months (n=484).

Note: Participants were allowed multiple responses.

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About Netsafe

Netsafe is an independent non-profit organisation with an unrelenting focus on online safety. We keep people of all ages safe online by providing free support, advice and education. Visit netsafe.org.nz for useful resources or call 0508 638 723 seven days a week for help with an online incident.

The research

Netsafe conducted a nationwide study to understand the prevalence of unwanted digital communications in New Zealand during the nationwide COVID-19 Lockdown. As the Lockdown got underway, the number of reports about harmful digital communications that Netsafe's call centre received began to increase, with this trend continuing after the Lockdown period. Netsafe wanted to find out more. This study explores the experiences of unwanted digital communication in the last 12 months, just before, during, and after Lockdown. A total of 1,150 people participated in the study and represented the population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, religion and region. The findings from the study provide a source of robust information for researchers and policymakers seeking to learn lessons about the pandemic.

The Harmful Digital Communications Act

The Harmful Digital Communications Act (HDCA) was passed in 2015 to help people dealing with serious or repeated harmful digital communications. It lays out 10 communication principles that guide how to communicate online. The Act covers any harmful digital communications (like text, emails or social media content) which can include racist, sexist and religiously intolerant comments – plus those about disabilities or sexual orientation.

The 10 Communication Principles state that digital communication should not:

- disclose sensitive personal facts about an individual
- be threatening, intimidating, or menacing
- be grossly offensive to a reasonable person in the position of the affected individual
- be indecent or obscene
- be used to harass an individual
- make a false allegation
- contain a matter that is published in breach of confidence
- incite or encourage anyone to send a message to an individual to cause harm to the individual
- incite or encourage an individual to commit suicide

- denigrate an individual because of colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability

If you want more information about the Act or would like support with an online incident, you can visit netsafe.org.nz