

Minister of Health



Ministre de la Santé

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0K9

Mr. Bill Casey, M.P.
Chair
Standing Committee on Health
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. Casey,

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons, I am pleased to respond, on behalf of the Government of Canada, to the Report of the Standing Committee on Health, entitled Report on the Public Health Effects of the Ease of Access and Viewing of Online Violent and Degrading Sexually Explicit Material on Children, Women, and Men.

The Government commends the members of the Committee for undertaking this study and thanks the witnesses who provided their valuable expertise and research, through testimony delivered to the Committee, and to those individuals and organizations who submitted written briefs outlining their perspectives and experience on the topic.

The Government's response demonstrates how a range of Government activities align with the Committee's recommendations. It also highlights the importance of federally-funded research in informing policy and programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Ginette Petitpas Taylor'.

The Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, P.C., M.P.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Canada welcomes the Report of the Standing Committee on Health and agrees with the spirit and intent of its recommendations. It is a timely report that speaks to the increasingly complex concerns and risks related to the prevalence of sexually explicit material on the internet. Youth are exposed to this online material easily and often unintentionally. The Government of Canada is undertaking a range of activities that help equip families and children with knowledge, resources and support.

Recommendation 1: Updating the 2008 Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education

In consideration of the vast array of internet sites offering easy access to sexually explicit material and the need to provide Canadians with reliable sexual health information, the Government agrees with the Committee's recommendation to update the 2008 Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education (Guidelines). The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) is currently supporting an update to the Guidelines through funding to the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN). The Guidelines are to be published and disseminated in 2018. The Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School health, a partnership of 25 Ministries of Health and Education across Canada that PHAC helps to financially support, has agreed to be engaged in this update in an advisory capacity.

The Guidelines will provide a detailed framework that serves as a guide for the development of effective, broadly based and inclusive sexual health education, and are intended to support the efforts of professionals working in the area of sexual health education and promotion. They will assist curriculum and program planners, educators in and out of school settings, policy-makers, and health care professionals. The updated Guidelines will also aim to offer clear direction to assist local, regional and national groups and government bodies concerned with education and health to develop and improve sexual health education policies, programs and curricula that address the diverse needs of all Canadians.

Sexual health is a key aspect of health and well-being that affects individuals across their lifespan. The material included in the Guidelines can enhance positive sexual health outcomes, support resilience and healthy sexuality, and help mitigate the influence of negative online material.

Recommendation 2: Developing a Canadian Sexual Health Promotion Strategy

The Government of Canada agrees with the intent of this recommendation. However, rather than developing a stand-alone sexual health promotion strategy, the Government of Canada is taking immediate concrete action to address sexual health and internet safety in the context of

relevant Government of Canada initiatives to equip Canadians with knowledge and resources for good sexual health and online safety through a range of activities.

For example, the new version of the Guidelines will reflect a health promotion approach by incorporating education on sexual health in the digital age, gender-based violence, consent, and supplementary information for young people to learn about the spectrum of sexual expressions and identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, questioning, 2 spirited (LGBTQ2+) communities. The updated Guidelines will also feature an enhanced focus on media literacy and the prevention of and testing for sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections.

In addition, Public Safety Canada (PS), through the National Strategy for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation on the Internet (National Strategy), is producing a range of public awareness and educational resources to help Canadians and their families to stay safe while using the Internet, and is supporting the production of a range of public awareness and education resources. To carry out this work, the National Strategy is supporting the Canadian Centre for Child Protection to operate [Cybertip.ca \(www.protectchildren.ca\)](http://www.protectchildren.ca), a tip line for reporting the online sexual exploitation of children. One of the educational resources developed as a result of the National Strategy is Kids in the Know. Kids in the Know is an interactive education program for increasing the personal safety of children and reducing their risk of sexual victimization both online and offline. The program is being used by schools across Canada; it has been adopted in some provinces province-wide, in others, at the school level.

Through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Government of Canada also supports research that informs public health policy and programming in the area of sexual and reproductive health. For example, the Applied Public Health Research Chair in Sexual and Reproductive Health, funded through CIHR's Institute of Population and Public Health, is working to advance knowledge in the area of health equity and family planning. This information is intended to inform the development of public health interventions that optimize family planning and reproductive care policies and services.

Additionally, in Budget 2017, the Government of Canada announced \$100.9 million over five years, starting in 2017-18, to establish Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence. The Strategy supports federal activities across three pillars of action: prevention; support for survivors; and legal and justice system responses. The aim is to reduce all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) experienced by women, girls and gender non-conforming individuals. Under the prevention pillar of the Strategy, PHAC will support the implementation and testing of ways to prevent GBV, including child maltreatment and teen dating violence through the promotion of healthy relationships.

Recommendation 3: Applying a Gender-based Analysis Plus Lens

The Government of Canada agrees with the Committee's recommendation to apply a Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens in the update of the Guidelines and in health promotion initiatives more generally. Importantly, as part of the Government of Canada's commitment to GBA+, the Minister of Status of Women is mandated, as an overarching goal, to ensure that government policy, laws and regulations are sensitive to the different impacts that decisions can have on men and women. PHAC has access to sex-disaggregated data and research, in addition to a number of established processes, tools and resources, to support the continued implementation of GBA+ in its programs and initiatives. In its role of building GBA+ capacity across government, Status of Women Canada (SWC) will continue to support other government departments by providing tools, resources and advice regarding the application of GBA+.

GBA+ has shown that issues surrounding access to sexual health education and care differ for men and women and also depend on other factors such as sexual orientation and culture. Additionally, given that negative sexual health outcomes can affect people differently based on their biological sex, sex-based approaches reflecting these differences are key. The application of GBA+ lens in PHAC's work on sexual health promotion will broaden our understanding of the specific health determinants of men, women and gender diverse people. In the context of sexual health, implementing a GBA+ lens means promoting sexual health research that is sensitive to sex and gender. It also means taking into consideration the ways in which other determinants (e.g. ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation) interact with sex and gender and how these interactions contribute to exposures to other risk factors and to health outcomes. Applying a GBA+ lens in the update of the Guidelines will also help to challenge stereotypes and harmful attitudes about women and men, and support sexual health empowerment and self-efficacy. This will support educators and service providers in addressing barriers to sexual health education and addressing the diverse sexual health education needs of all Canadians. SIECCAN and its partners have a history of and a commitment to recognizing the diverse needs of women, men and gender-diverse people and applying this lens in their work.

Recommendation 4: Protecting Children from Exposure to online Sexually Explicit Material

With respect to sub recommendation 4.a., the Government of Canada is making available information and best practices that support parents and families in protecting children from exposure to online sexually explicit material through a number of initiatives.

First is the Get Cyber Safe campaign (www.getcybersafe.gc.ca), a public awareness initiative established as part of the PS-led Canada's Cyber Security Strategy. Through the Get Cyber Safe webpages, parents, families and all Canadians can learn more about online threats and how to

improve their safety when online. The website includes resources to help guide parents in discussing online behavior with their children.

Another example is PHAC's Stop Family Violence (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/sfv-avf/index-eng.php) webpages that provide links to resources that promote safe relationships (from organizations such as the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Red Cross, and the Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence Network). These pages now also include links to resources related to healthy sexuality and to safety online. These webpages are hosted by PHAC on behalf of the Family Violence Initiative, a forum for federal collaboration that brings together 15 federal departments and agencies to advance a multi-sectoral approach to prevent and respond to family violence.

In addition, as part of Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-based Violence, a Knowledge Centre will be established within SWC. This Knowledge Centre will serve as a hub to coordinate federal actions and account publicly for results. It will also develop, analyse and disseminate practical data and evidence on the state of gender-based violence – including various forms of online violence – and evidence-based practices to prevent and address it.

With respect to sub recommendation 4.b. and the important role that technology companies, electronic manufacturers, software and browser developers have in creating better content filters and tools, the Government of Canada is engaged with providers through a number of initiatives to assist parents with protecting their children online.

First, through their National Strategy, PS is providing funding to the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) to provide educational resources and tools for parents and families to improve online safety for children, accessible through the cybertip.ca website. PS is also supporting the operation of C3P's Project CleanFeed (www.cybertip.ca/appen/projects-cleanfeed). This initiative is a partnership between C3P and Canada's major internet service providers (ISPs), whereby C3P maintains an up-to-date list of specific foreign-hosted internet addresses associated with images or videos of child sexual abuse, and provides this list in a secure manner to participating ISPs. ISPs then add the identified internet addresses to their filters to automatically block Canadian customers from accessing those websites.

Also through funding provided by PS under the National Strategy, C3P has developed Project Arachnid (www.cybertip.ca/app/en/projects-arachnid). Project Arachnid is an automated technical system that crawls links on the internet previously reported to cybertip.ca for containing child sexual abuse material. If child sexual abuse material is identified, a notice is sent to the hosting service provider requesting the material's immediate removal. As a result, this project is reducing the availability of online child sexual abuse material. For example, over a

six week period in 2016, 5.1 million webpages hosting child sexual abuse material were detected by Arachnid.

Finally, in 2011, the Government introduced legislation that requires ISPs to report suspected online child sexual exploitation images/videos ("child pornography") publically available to C3P. Under this legislation, ISPs are required to report this information to local law enforcement if the internet provider address in question is located on their network. This mandatory reporting, in combination with Project Cleanfeed and Arachid, is helping to limit access to online child sexual exploitation images/videos.

Given the evolving nature of the online world, the Government of Canada will continue to discuss new evidence and information on this topic at various federal tables on violence prevention.

The Government thanks the Standing Committee on Health for their work on this issue. This response demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting the sexual health and safety of Canadians, in particular of children and youth, as well as our commitment to helping protect Canadians from potential harm related to exposure to online sexually explicit material.