

Online Exposure: Experiences of Extreme or Illegal Content in Aotearoa – Key Findings

The research *Online Exposure: Experiences of Extreme or Illegal Content in Aotearoa* was published by the Classification Office on 27 January, 2026. This document presents key findings from the report.

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Most New Zealanders are aware that some content is illegal, but many are unsure about the types of content that might cross the legal line.

Most New Zealanders – around 8 in 10 – have a general awareness that some types of content are illegal to possess, create or share. However, there is widespread uncertainty about the specific types of content that might cross this legal line. More than half of the population (55%) feel they have a limited understanding about what might be illegal, and very few feel highly informed about this (4%).

When asked to describe content that might be illegal in their own words, around half (47%) gave at least one example of content that would likely be considered ‘objectionable’ under the Classification Act. However, results suggest that people’s level of understanding varies considerably – and may indicate a significant level of uncertainty about the types of content that might cross the legal threshold.

The most common types of potentially illegal content mentioned by participants included child sexual exploitation material and terrorist or violent extremist material. Many participants used broad or ambiguous terms such as pornography or violence, which may or may not refer to illegal content depending on the context. Some also mentioned content or online behaviours that are potentially illegal under different legislation – such as piracy, or privacy breaches – but are outside the scope of the Classification Act.

While this question was not intended as a comprehensive measure of people’s knowledge, results do provide important insights into “top-of mind” awareness about the types of content that might be illegal.

Seeing extreme or illegal content is a common experience for many New Zealanders.

Findings suggest that exposure to extreme – and potentially illegal – online content is a common experience for many New Zealanders, with two-thirds (66%) reporting they have seen such material at some point. This exposure often involves multiple categories of content – 38% had seen three or more, and 19% had seen five or more.

More than half (56%) had seen some form of content involving graphic or extreme violence and cruelty, and nearly half (45%) had seen content that promotes or encourages violent or illegal activity such as violence, crime, or terrorism.

While less common, some reported seeing specific types of content that are highly likely to be illegal, including explicit content showing sexual activity between people and animals (17%), and explicit sexual content involving children or young teenagers (8%).

Although most came across extreme or illegal content only occasionally, around 1 in 4 (42%) had seen this content in the last year, and around 1 in 10 (9%) had seen content at least a few times a month or more often.

While these findings rely on the subjective views of the participants regarding what they saw, they suggest that encountering extreme or illegal material online is a widespread reality.

Exposure is often unintentional, and actively looking for extreme or illegal content is rare.

People encounter extreme or illegal content across various online environments, with social media being the most common.

Many came across this material on websites or social media, but they weren’t seeking it out intentionally. Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, around half had seen it on a website when they weren’t looking for it (48%), or came across it on their social media feed (47%).

Just 4% reported actively searching for extreme or illegal content, highlighting that the vast majority of these encounters occur through passive or unintentional exposure.

Some experience significant harm from exposure, and many take steps to avoid this content.

Encountering extreme or illegal material can cause serious harm. Of those who had seen this type of content the past year, 27% reported experiencing personal harm from exposure – such as emotional, psychological, social, financial, or other harmful effects on their daily life. Nearly half (44%) of those affected described the impact as very or extremely harmful.

On a national scale, this equates to roughly one in ten New Zealanders (11%) experiencing some level of harm, and 1 in 20 (5%) experiencing serious harm from exposure to extreme or illegal content.

In response to these encounters, most took active measures to limit further exposure. Of those who had seen content in the past year, 74% took at least one action to avoid it in future – most often by using platform tools to hide posts or by flagging the material directly to the app or website. However, few of those affected reported content to online safety organisations like Netsafe (7%), and even fewer reached out to law enforcement (1%) or other government agencies (1%).

Extreme or illegal content can be difficult to avoid online, and most think it's a growing problem.

Many New Zealanders believe that encountering extreme or illegal online content is an unavoidable reality of using the internet. Around half of the population (49%) 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed that such material is impossible to avoid, while 30% disagreed with this. There is also widespread agreement that extreme or illegal content online is a growing problem. The great majority (78%) think that exposure to this content will increase over time.

Most would consider reporting extremely harmful, dangerous or illegal online content, and many express some degree of trust in online platforms or law enforcement to remove this content.

Many New Zealanders have some level of confidence in the ability of both law enforcement and online platforms to manage illegal or extreme online content.

A majority of the population (65%) trust official agencies to remove dangerous material, and 57% believe that popular websites and social media platforms will act quickly to take down such content. Around a quarter of participants 'strongly agreed' with these statements, suggesting that – while trust is relatively high overall – there is a fair level of uncertainty amongst the public.

This confidence extends to the justice system – a majority (63%) agree that those who create or share illegal content are likely to face prosecution or other legal consequences, including 33% who 'strongly agree'.

Furthermore, there is a willingness among the public to take action themselves, with the great majority of New Zealanders (86%) indicating that they would either likely or potentially report extremely harmful online material to an official agency. When asked why they might not report content, common themes included a lack of knowledge about who to contact or how to report, the effort or time required, or a lack of trust that reports would lead to action.

Younger New Zealanders are most affected by extreme or illegal content.

Exposure to extreme or illegal content can happen to anyone, but is significantly more common among younger adults. The great majority of 18–24 Year Olds (82%) have seen at least one type of content, and this was more common among men (88%) than women (79%) in this age group.

Furthermore, younger New Zealanders were also more likely to see multiple types of extreme content. Over a third (36%) of 18–24 year olds had seen five or more types of content, and 17% had seen seven or more.

Younger adults also encounter this content more frequently. Just over half (51%) of 18–29 year olds had seen extreme content at least a few times in the last year, while 21% had seen it at least a few times a month.

The harmful impact of exposure disproportionately affects women and younger adults. Over a quarter (27%) of 18–24 year olds have experienced harm – this was more common for younger women, who were also more likely to rate their experience as "very" or "extremely" harmful (14%) compared with 11% of men in this age group. Of the overall population, 15% of women reported experiencing harm compared with 7% of men.