



Classification Office

TE MANA WHAKAATU

Online Exposure

Experiences of Extreme or Illegal
Content in Aotearoa

Online Exposure: Experiences of Extreme or Illegal Content in Aotearoa

Content Warning:



This report includes discussion of harmful online content, including content that is illegal in New Zealand. This includes references to suicide, child sexual abuse material, violent extremist content, and graphic violence.

The report does not include detailed descriptions of this content, but the topics discussed are highly sensitive and may be distressing or upsetting for some readers.

If you or someone you know needs support, we have included a list of resources and services at the end of this report (see page 40). This also includes information about reporting harmful content and tools to help you and your whānau stay safe online.

Acknowledgements

We're grateful for the thoughtful engagement of participants from across Aotearoa New Zealand who completed our survey and shared their views and experiences with us. We'd like to thank the team at Ipsos for their work on the survey design, fieldwork and analysis. We'd also like to acknowledge Alice Kan at AK Research for assisting us with initial development on the survey.

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Foreword

As far as I'm aware, this survey is the first of its kind in Aotearoa.

We asked New Zealand adults uncomfortable questions about the types of objectionable or illegal content they may have seen, wherever they choose to be online. I want to extend my sincere thanks to the people who participated in this survey. It follows on from conversations we had with young people last year about extremely harmful content online.

We expressly asked participants what types of potentially illegal content they might have seen and their awareness of the law, and the results are striking. Most New Zealanders are aware that some content is illegal, but many aren't confident about the types of content that might cross the threshold into being illegal.

The survey findings show that seeing extreme or illegal content is a common experience for many New Zealanders. Some experience significant harm from exposure, and many take steps to avoid this content. Participants told us that extreme or illegal content can be difficult to avoid online, and most think it's a growing problem.

For me, these results are telling. The internet has changed the way that content is available to New Zealanders, and some of the worst of the worst content is available to those who never wanted to see it. As a community, we are experiencing generational differences – younger audiences encounter more extreme content, and older audiences worry about its impact on their families and communities. But across generations, one thing is clear: people still see this material as harmful and New Zealanders are not desensitised to extreme content.

People's comments in the survey tell me that there is concern in the community about the availability of this content, there is a general unawareness about its legal status, and people are experiencing harm. This is where we need to do better. It is the role of the Classification Office to inform the New Zealand public about their rights and responsibilities when it comes to content; we all have a part to play in keeping this content away. The public will be seeing a lot more from us with clear guidance about the law, descriptions of content and advice on how to keep themselves and their whānau safe. We can no longer be queasy about this issue or talk about it indirectly – we must be clear about what this content is and the harm that it can do, because there is no room for it in our society.

I am heartened by the responses from people who say that more can be done, and that they believe that offenders will be held to account for making or sharing this content. As a community, we all have a part to play in keeping each other safe. Firstly, we shouldn't make or share objectionable content. Secondly, when we see it, we can do something about it for our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. And thirdly, we can help to hold offenders accountable when we report it.



A stylized handwritten signature in black ink.

Caroline Flora
Chief Censor

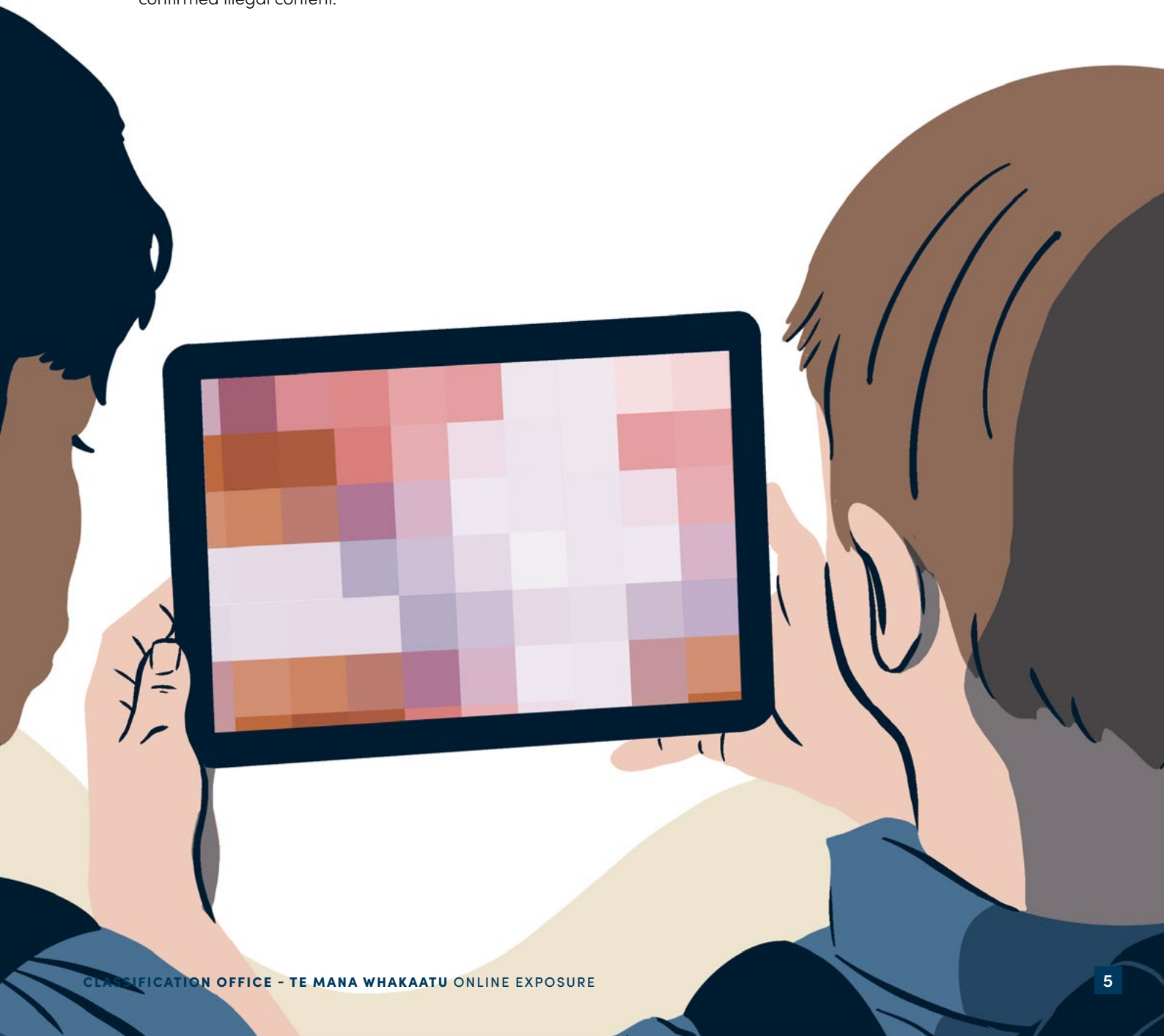
What do we mean by ‘extreme or illegal content’?

In this report, ‘extreme or illegal content’ refers to material that could potentially be classified as ‘objectionable’ – meaning illegal – in New Zealand under the [Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993](#) (the Classification Act).

Determining if content is objectionable requires expert assessment by Classification Office staff, and so the survey cannot directly measure exposure to confirmed illegal content.

For questions about exposure to content, respondents were asked about types of material that are more likely to meet that threshold. Their answers were based on personal interpretation, so the findings do not indicate exposure to illegal content, but to *potentially illegal* content.

The appendix on page 41 includes the full question about exposure including content categories. See [our website](#) for a more detailed overview of how this question was asked, and additional context and information on interpreting the findings.



Key findings

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 during 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 1 in 10 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 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 to 24-year-olds (82%) have seen at least one type of this 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 to 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 to 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.

Background and objectives

Who we are and what we do

The Classification Office – Te Mana Whakaatu (the Office) is an independent Crown entity responsible for classifying material which may need to be restricted or banned. This can include films, books, video games and online content.

Our role includes classifying potentially objectionable (illegal) material submitted by enforcement agencies and the courts. The majority of this involves child sexual abuse material, followed by content promoting terrorism and violent extremism.

While we are not responsible for investigations or enforcement, the Office contributes to wider efforts to reduce the availability of objectionable content in Aotearoa and globally. We work closely with domestic agencies including Police, the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA), New Zealand Customs, and the courts. Internationally, our work contributes to networks such as Tech Against Terrorism, the Christchurch Call, and Project Arachnid, run by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P), which aims to detect and remove child sexual exploitation material from the internet.

Our role goes beyond classification. We provide age ratings and content warnings, conduct research, and produce evidence-based resources to promote media literacy. Through prevention and education, we help New Zealanders make informed choices about what they watch, and support educators and community leaders to respond and guide others on safety and wellbeing.

What is ‘objectionable’ content?

The classification system balances the need to protect New Zealanders from harmful content while respecting the right to freedom of expression under the [New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990](#).

Content is classified as ‘objectionable’ when it crosses a legal threshold and is likely to be harmful to society as a whole. This includes content promoting things like extreme violence, sexual violence, child sexual exploitation, or terrorism. Objectionable content – which can include text, video, images, and audio – is banned by law in New Zealand, meaning it’s illegal to create, possess, or share.

See our website for more information about banned or illegal content¹.

Why we’re doing this work

Harmful online content is an issue that impacts all of society. New Zealanders – including children and young people – can be exposed to extremely harmful content in online spaces, and many face this exposure without adequate support or guidance. It is the role of the Classification Office to raise awareness and help people to navigate these situations safely.

Under the Classification Act, there is an obligation to provide the public with clear information about the classification system. In 2026, with the digital world more complex than ever, people deserve to know their rights and responsibilities while possessing practical tools for self-protection.

¹ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/enforcement-officials/banned-or-illegal-content

Helping people stay safe requires evidence about people's experiences with online content in their daily lives. Over the past few years we've been developing our understanding through a series of research projects. These include:

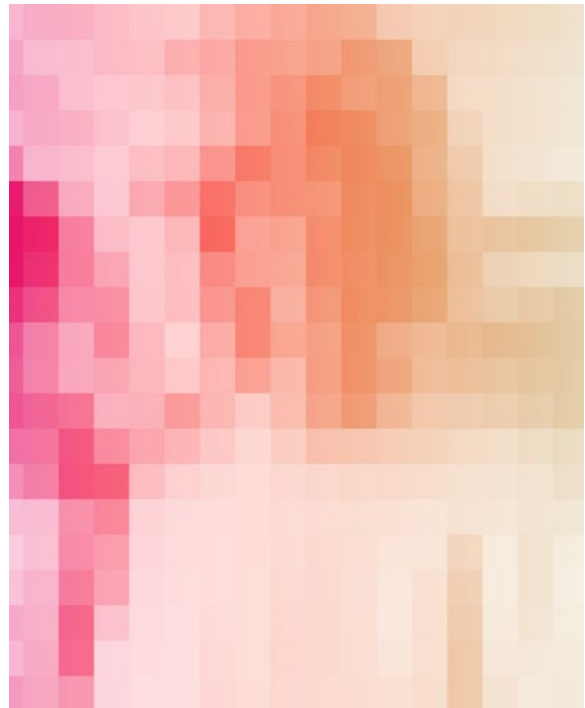
- [*What We're Watching* \(2022\)](#)², which explored New Zealanders' views and experiences with harmful content.
- [*Online Misogyny and Violent Extremism: Understanding the Landscape* \(2024\)](#)³. A literature review which highlighted how little New Zealand-specific evidence exists in this area – especially on people's direct experiences of extremely harmful content.

Most recently, we published [*Content that Crosses the Line* \(2025\)](#)⁴, based on insights from a series of group consultations with young people. These consultations highlighted that some young people are seeing or engaging with extremely harmful, and in some cases illegal, content online. The report also highlighted that young people often lacked guidance or support, and emphasised the importance of discussing these difficult topics with trusted adults without fear of judgement⁵.

We conducted the current nationally representative survey for evidence about:

- People's exposure to extreme or illegal content
- The impact this exposure has on them
- Their awareness and understanding about what types of content are illegal in New Zealand
- Their views about extreme or illegal content and online safety.

By understanding the scale of the issue, we can better develop educational tools, inform policy, and improve our services. We have heard from educators, parents, and communities that the online environment is changing rapidly, meaning our response must evolve just as quickly. It is essential for the public to distinguish between what is harmful and what is strictly illegal, and to know exactly how to respond when they encounter such material.



² www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/what-were-watching

³ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/online-misogyny-and-violent-extremism-summary-report

⁴ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/content-that-crosses-the-line

⁵ See Insights from our youth consultations on page 36.

Research method

The Classification Office designed a survey to better understand New Zealanders' experiences, awareness and views about extreme or illegal content and commissioned Ipsos⁶ (an independent market research company) to run the survey.

Survey design

Our research team looked at a variety of local and international surveys, adapting our approach and methodology to make this study relevant in the context of Aotearoa and our legal classification criteria. Ipsos reviewed and provided assistance with the final survey design.

A nationally representative survey

Ipsos conducted an online survey of 1,000 New Zealanders, from 17-27 November, 2025. The sample was representative of age, gender, and region. Weighting was then applied to ethnicity to ensure a representative spread.

The maximum margin of error on the total group n=1,000 is $\pm 3.1\%$ (for a 50% figure at the 95% confidence level). Unless otherwise stated, subgroup differences noted in the report for age, gender or ethnicity:

- Are statistically significant compared with the total result at the 95% confidence level.
- Do not include differences for subgroups with a sample size smaller than n=50.

See page 19 and 31 for findings about demographic differences.

Note that figures on page 14, *Knowledge about illegal content types based on written responses*, are based on in-house data analysis by the Classification Office research team. While based on the same dataset, these use a different analysis technique (manual coding) to the rest of the report and were not subject to weighting for ethnicity.

Safety, privacy and confidentiality

The survey included questions about some highly sensitive topics, and it was important that participants felt comfortable giving open and honest answers. Participants were informed that their privacy is guaranteed, and that their names will not be linked to their responses.

Participants were informed that the survey was commissioned by the Classification Office and were provided information about our role. They were given clear and transparent information about the nature and purpose of the survey, including why the questions were being asked, the survey topics covered, and that participation is voluntary, with the ability to skip questions or withdraw at any point.

All surveys conducted by Ipsos undergo internal review for ethics and safety, which includes identifying and revising any potentially distressing, ambiguous, or leading questions. Participants were also given a list of support services they could reach out to if required.

⁶ www.ipsos.com/en-nz

Context and limitations

This survey provides a snapshot of beliefs, attitudes and experiences at a particular point in time. Perceptions and concerns may be influenced by various factors such as recent local or international events, controversy about specific examples of harmful content, or other online safety issues.

The aim of the question about exposure (see page 25) was to help us understand how common it is for people to encounter potentially illegal content in New Zealand. To achieve this, the survey was carefully designed to focus on this type of content, and to encourage open and honest responses.

Nonetheless, questions relied on participants' subjective opinions or understanding of whether the content types listed applied to content they had seen, and results are not intended to provide an objective or precise measure of exposure.

See *Exposure to extreme or illegal content* on page 24 for more information about this question. For the full text of the question, and a list of content categories, see *Appendix: Exposure to content survey question* (page 41).

Additional context and information on interpreting the findings – and a more detailed overview of how this question was asked – is available on our website: [Online Exposure: Experiences of Extreme or Illegal Content in Aotearoa – Supplementary information](#).

Reading tables and charts

The survey involved 1,000 participants. Some of the questions were asked to fewer participants based on their response to previous questions. For example, the sample size for frequency of exposure to content is n=405 (those who had seen one or more content types in the last 12 months). For some of these questions, an additional table has been provided which shows percentages based on the full sample of n=1,000.

The base sample and size is included in each chart. The base sizes shown in the tables and graphs use unweighted data (as the statistical reliability of results is determined by unweighted base sizes).

The percentages in the tables and graphs use weighted data to ensure the survey results are representative of the population of interest. Percentages in the tables and graphs may not add up to 100% due to:

- Rounding or because respondents were able to give more than one answer to some questions.
- Projecting a question that was asked to a subset of the full base.

Note that figures on page 15, *Knowledge about illegal content types based on written responses*, are based on a different analysis technique (manual coding) to the rest of the report and are not based on weighted data.

Survey findings

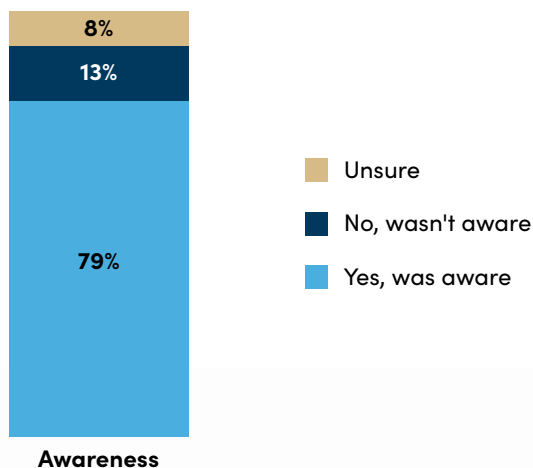
Views about harmful or illegal content

Awareness and knowledge about illegal content

Do people get charged for watching illegal content or is it just the creator?

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-34

Before today, were you aware that some types of content are illegal to possess, create or share in NZ?

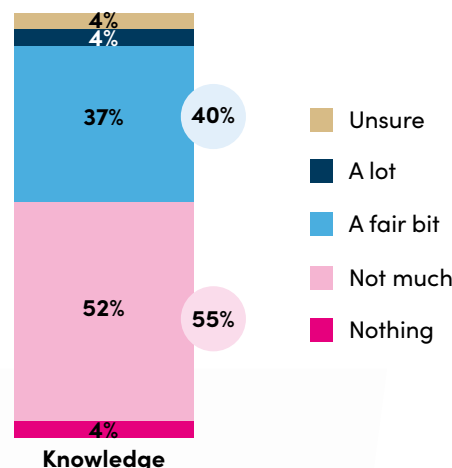


Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Most New Zealanders (79%) are aware that some types of content are illegal to possess, create or share. However, many do not feel confident about the types of content that might cross the legal line.

Asked to rate their level of knowledge, a majority said they knew 'not much' (52%) or 'nothing' (4%) about the types of content that might be illegal, while 37% said they knew 'a fair bit' and just 4% knew 'a lot'.

How much would you say you know about the types of content that might be illegal in New Zealand?



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Unsure of what is actually illegal and I feel like a lot is on the line and I'm not comfortable with but may not be illegal and too annoying to report

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-34

Not sure if it's able to be prosecuted under New Zealand law.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

Knowledge about illegal content types based on written responses⁷

Participants were asked to describe, in their own words, the types of content they thought could be illegal in New Zealand. The various terms participants used in written responses were grouped into categories for analysis. Results are based on 830 responses, as not all participants provided written responses. Results in this section are presented as a percentage of all participants.

Just under half (47%) gave at least one example of content that would likely be considered 'objectionable' under the Classification Act. The most common types of potentially illegal content mentioned by participants included:

- Child sexual exploitation/abuse material (CSEM/CSAM): 37%
- Terrorist or violent extremist material: 13%
- Bestiality (sexual acts involving animals): 11%

Participants used a variety of terms to describe content. For example, terms relating to the sexual exploitation of children or young people included "child porn", "child pornography", "child sex abuse content", and "sex with underage children". Some also made more general references to "child abuse" or "child exploitation" without an explicit sexual reference. Taken together, just under half mentioned at least one example involving harm to children.

A small number of participants referred to specific examples of content that have been classified as 'objectionable', such as material relating to the March 15 Mosque attacks in 2019.

While many provided clear examples of potentially illegal content, 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.

Many responses used broad and ambiguous labels such as 'pornography' or 'violence' without enough detail to judge whether they meant illegal (objectionable) content, restricted content, or material that is harmful but generally legal.

Furthermore, around 1 in 4 (28%) 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.

Some also treated hate speech or bullying as 'illegal content' although responses did not include enough detail to judge whether it was unlawful (for example incitement, threats, or intent to cause harm). Overall, this suggests some people were using 'illegal content' as a broader label for online harms and offending, rather than content covered by the Classification Act.

Results reflect what participants could easily recall, unprompted, and felt comfortable describing in writing. 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.

⁷ Figures in this section are based on analysis of written responses and these use a different analysis technique (manual coding) to the rest of the report. See *A nationally representative survey* on page 11 for further information.

Views about harmful or illegal content and online safety

We asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about harmful or illegal content, law enforcement and online safety.

Results show that many New Zealanders think illegal content is hard to avoid. Around half (49%) 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed that it's impossible to avoid seeing illegal content if you use the internet, while 30% disagreed. The common perception that illegal content is impossible to avoid reflects findings covered later in this report, where a majority reported

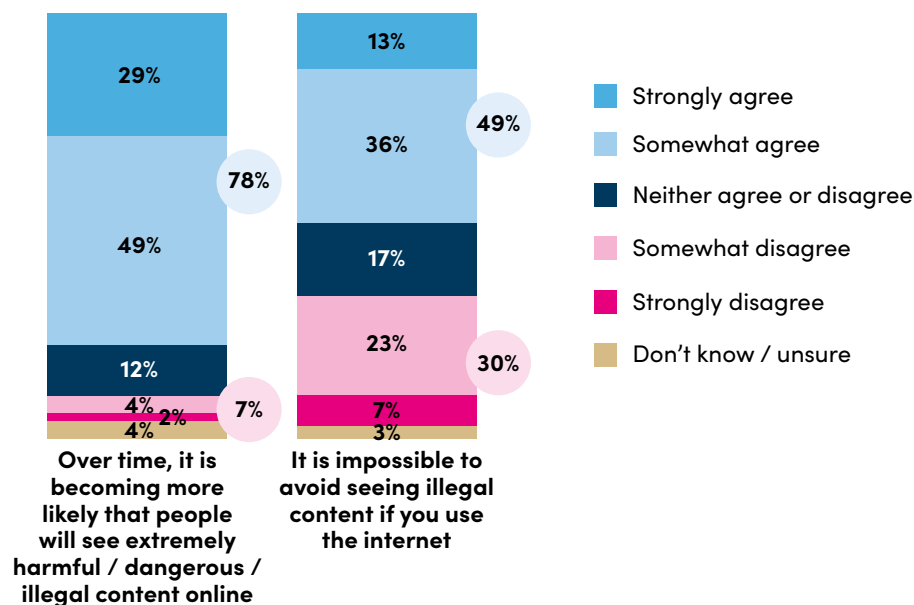
personally seeing extreme or potentially illegal content at some point in their lives (see page 26).

There is also broad agreement that harmful or illegal content online is a growing problem. Most (78%) believe that exposure to extremely harmful, dangerous or illegal content online will increase over time, including 29% who strongly agreed with this statement.

I know harmful content exists in places online. [It] still feels like you need to go looking for it specifically though.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54

Now thinking more generally about harmful or illegal content online... how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

[I'm] concerned about young teenagers or younger generations being exposed to these type of content and not [being] able [to] differentiate rights and wrongs, misleading their minds and thinking.

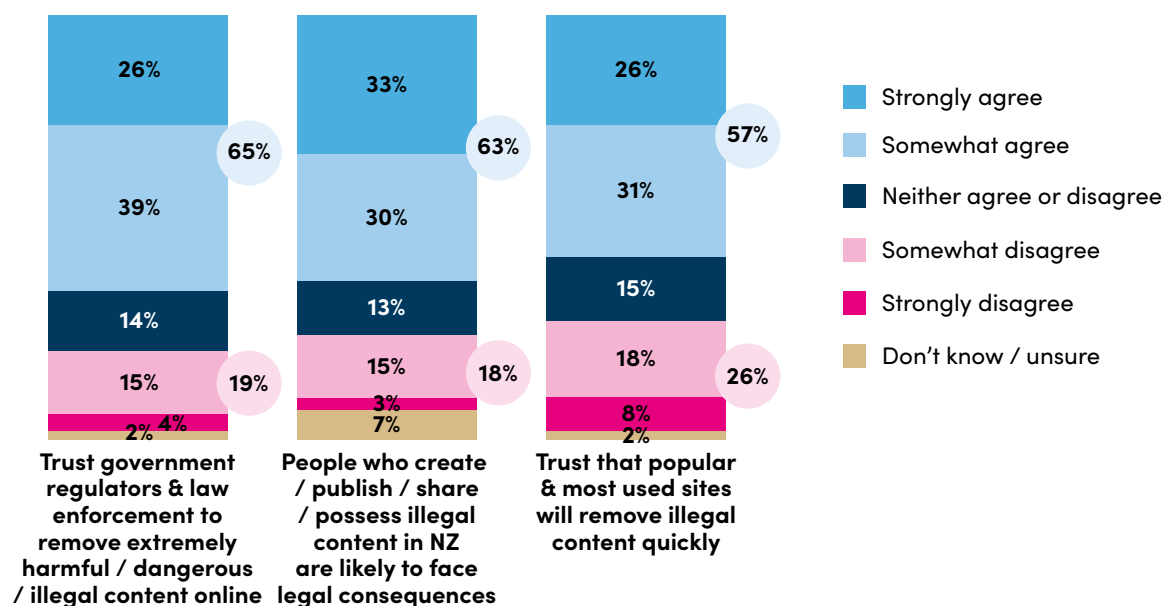
FEMALE, ASIAN, AGE 45-54

At the same time, many expressed some degree of confidence in online platforms or law enforcement to remove extreme or illegal content when it appears online. A majority of New Zealanders (65%) trust official agencies and law enforcement to remove extremely harmful, dangerous or illegal content online, while 19% disagreed. Likewise, a majority (57%) trust popular websites or social media platforms to remove illegal content quickly if it appears on their sites, while 26% disagreed.

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.

Many also expressed some degree of confidence that offenders would be dealt with by the justice system. A majority (63%) somewhat or strongly agreed that people who create, publish, share or possess illegal content in New Zealand are likely to face legal consequences, while 18% disagreed.

Now thinking more generally about harmful or illegal content online... how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Reporting harmful or illegal content

Most New Zealanders (86%) would consider reporting online content that might be extremely harmful, dangerous or illegal to an official agency in New Zealand. This includes 44% who said they would be likely to report such content, while a further 42% said they might consider doing so.

We also asked participants to tell us, in their own words, why they might not report this type of content to an official agency. This question was asked to those who said they would 'possibly' report harmful content, those who 'would not' report this content, and those who were unsure.

Common themes included a lack of knowledge about who to contact or how to report, or the effort or time required. A number of participants also expressed a lack of trust that reports would lead to action, or uncertainty about the nature of the content and whether it should be reported.

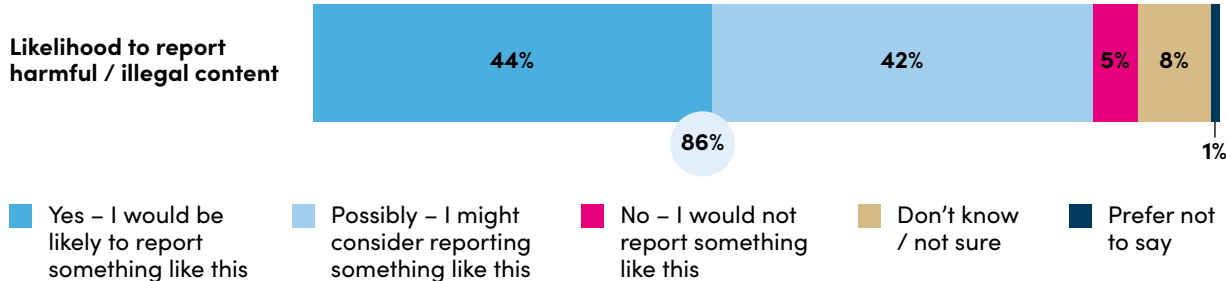
For information about how to report harmful or illegal content, see the *Helplines and reporting guide* on page 40.

I might not know if it was bad enough to report. I'm not sure where to report it. I think that may be a reason however depending on how extreme it was, I would likely find out and report it.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

In the future, if you saw something online that might be extremely harmful, dangerous or illegal, do you think you would report this to an official agency in New Zealand?

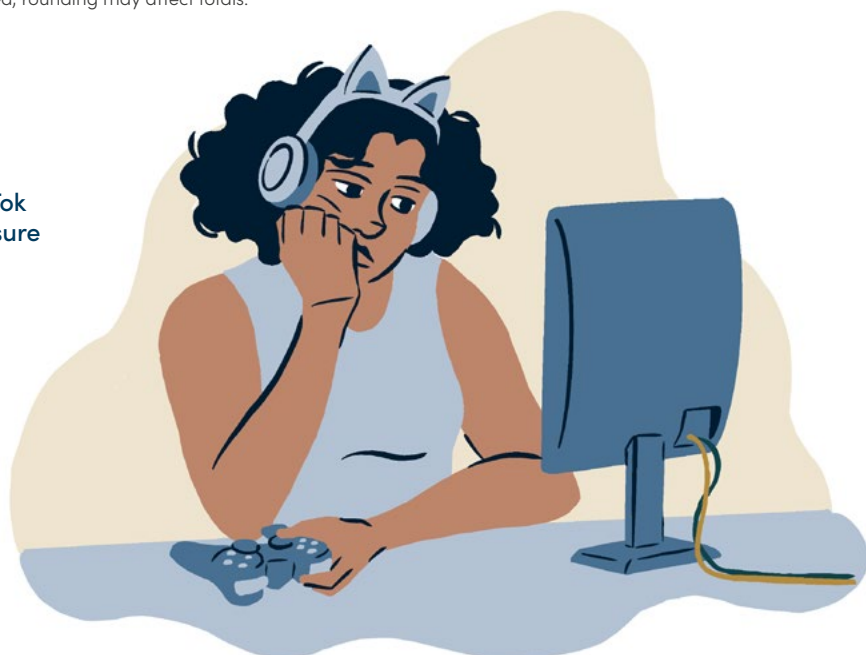
Likelihood to report harmful / illegal content



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

The videos that had popped up on Tik Tok weren't New Zealand related so I'm unsure if there is anything that could be done.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44



Insights: age, gender and ethnicity

Views on extreme or illegal content are broadly consistent across demographic groups, although some differences emerged amongst age, ethnicity and whether or not the individual had been exposed to harmful content.

Differences are statistically significant based on a comparison with the **overall result for all participants** who responded to the question. In the following pages, this is indicated using colour-coding:

Green text: figures are **significantly higher** than the overall result

Red text: figures are **significantly lower** than the overall result

No colour: figures do not indicate **statistically significant** differences

OVERALL RESULTS FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ILLEGAL CONTENT:

79% are aware that some content is illegal, and 40% feel they know 'a fair bit' or 'a lot' about the types of content that might be illegal.

VIEWS ABOUT HARMFUL OR ILLEGAL CONTENT AND ONLINE SAFETY:

49% believe seeing illegal content is unavoidable, and 78% think that, over time, exposure to this content will increase.

65% trust law enforcement to remove content, and 57% trust popular websites and social media platforms to do so quickly.

63% think people who create, share or possess illegal content in NZ are likely to face legal consequences.

REPORTING EXTREME OR ILLEGAL CONTENT:

Overall, 86% would consider reporting content to an official agency.

44% would be likely to report this to an official agency.

42% might consider reporting this to an official agency.

5% would not report this to an official agency.



AGE AND GENDER

Awareness and knowledge about illegal content

Most New Zealanders across all age groups are aware that certain online content is illegal. While gender differences weren't significant, awareness tended to increase with age: **87%** of those 65+ were aware that content can be illegal.

Despite their high general awareness, participants aged 65+ were more likely to think they knew 'nothing' or 'not much' about the specific types of content that are illegal (**63%**).

Views about extreme or illegal content and online safety

Younger participants were more likely to think illegal content is unavoidable online. A majority of those aged 18–24 (**63%**) and 18–29 (**62%**) agreed that it is 'impossible to avoid seeing illegal content if you use the internet'. This sentiment was strongest among women aged 18–29 (**64%**).

There was widespread agreement that exposure to extreme or illegal content will increase over time. Younger participants aged 18–24 were more likely to 'strongly agree' with this (**39%**), whereas only **18%** of those aged 65+ felt as strongly.

Trust in legal consequences tended to increase with age. While **74%** of those 65+ believe creators or sharers of illegal content will face legal action, only **46%** of those aged 18–24 share that view.

Older participants (65+) were also more likely to trust in technology companies, with **66%** believing that popular websites or social media platforms would remove illegal content quickly.

ETHNICITY⁸

Awareness and knowledge about illegal content

While awareness that some online content is illegal was relatively high across all ethnic groups, it was significantly higher for Europeans (**87%**) and lower for Asian participants (**59%**).

Views about extreme or illegal content and online safety

Asian participants were more likely to agree that illegal content is impossible to avoid online (**63%**), and Pacific people were more likely to strongly agree (**28%**).

Pacific participants were more likely to strongly agree that harmful or illegal content online is a growing problem (**45%**), while Asian participants expressed the highest level of confidence in moderation – with **67%** trusting popular websites and social media platforms to remove illegal content quickly.

⁸ Note on terminology: figures for 'European' include those identifying as 'NZ European' (66% of all participants) and 'other European' (11%).

PREVIOUS EXPOSURE TO EXTREME OR ILLEGAL CONTENT

The survey also compares overall results with people who reported having seen one or more of the listed content types at some point ('ever seen') and those who had seen this content more recently (in the last 12 months).

Those with prior exposure were more likely to agree that illegal material is impossible to avoid online; this sentiment was shared by **59%** of those who had ever seen such content and **67%** of those exposed within the last 12 months. Furthermore, **83%** of those exposed in the last year agreed – and **41%** strongly agreed – that exposure to this content will increase over time.

Those with direct experience were also less likely to express trust in law enforcement or online platforms to remove content. For example, of those who had seen content in last 12 months, **56%** expressed trust in official agencies and law enforcement to remove content, and **50%** believed that social media platforms would remove illegal content quickly. Furthermore, these participants were less likely to think that individuals in New Zealand who create or share illegal content would face legal consequences (**52%**).

Insights: New Zealanders' views

We gave participants the opportunity to tell us in their own words about their experiences with harmful content, or if they had any other comments about issues covered in the survey.

We received hundreds of responses to this question. Common themes included a desire for a stronger and more effective response to harmful online content – by social media platforms, or at a regulatory or enforcement level.

Participants also highlighted the need for plain-language guidance for the public on reporting – who to contact, what information to provide, and what to expect after making a report. Concerns about AI-generated or manipulated content were also common. The selected quotes below provide a snapshot of these views and concerns.

I am not sure who I would report it to if I ever saw something like this.

FEMALE, OTHER, AGE 65+

I think there should be more information about where to report illegal content.

FEMALE, PACIFIC, AGE 65+

I am wondering what the future will look like with AI, deepfakes, etc and the legal grey areas it will create. Especially worried about AI generated child exploitation and how that will be regulated if no real children are involved. But also, the market for revenge porn will go up with deepfakes. As a woman, that's stressful for me.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

I think there should be more information about where to report illegal content.

FEMALE, PACIFIC, AGE 65+

It's sometimes hard to know what is real and what is fake.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

I have grandchildren now, and I would like to know how to protect them, and how to help them protect themselves.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

The use of AI to generate images is likely to increase. Without changes, this will make it difficult to contain the misuse of that technology, and this will result in harm to others.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54

It needs to be addressed so kids don't stumble on it.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-34

There should be harsher punishment for people caught sharing or posting illegal images or video online.

FEMALE, ASIAN, AGE 55-64

Harmful content should be banned, and in no way should it be normalised to watch.

FEMALE, ASIAN, AGE 18-24

Experiences with extreme or illegal content

Exposure to extreme or illegal content

Determining whether content is legally 'objectionable' requires expert assessment, and so the survey did not attempt to measure direct exposure to illegal material as such. Instead, the survey aimed to understand how common it is for people to encounter *potentially illegal* content. In other words, types of content that are more likely to reach the legal threshold and could potentially be banned in New Zealand.

To achieve this, the survey was carefully designed and framed. It began with questions about participants' awareness of the law and asked them to describe content they believed might be illegal in New Zealand. In part, this aimed at encouraging participants to think about more extreme material before answering questions about exposure.

When asking the question about exposure, participants were told that it was about content that can cross legal boundaries and might be banned, and that it did not include mainstream commercial entertainment like movies or TV shows.

The listed categories were designed to focus on types of content that are more likely to be illegal, and we included examples of specific types of content where categories could be interpreted broadly. For example, participants were informed that "graphic violence, extreme cruelty or death involving people" might include graphic video or images of a mass-shooting, or executions.

Additional explanations were included to distinguish this material from legal adult or commercial content. For example, stating that "explicit sexual content involving children or young teenagers" is sometimes called "child sexual exploitation material" or "child pornography"⁹.

Finally, the survey encouraged honest responses by reminding participants that their answers were anonymous, confidential, and not linked to personal information. Participants were also reminded that exposure can occur accidentally and that the survey aimed only to understand how common such exposure is, regardless of how it occurred.

This appendix on page 41 includes the full question about exposure including content categories. See [our website](#) for a more detailed overview of how this question was asked, and additional context and information on interpreting the findings.

As soon as I realised the objectionable content was in a couple of emails sent to me by an unknown person, I deleted them immediately and blocked the sender's address. While it did not affect me, I felt concerned that my grandchildren, who were young at the time, could accidentally see something like this when playing on a computer belonging to me or their parents.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 65 YEARS AND OVER

9 The Classification Office generally refers to this content as "child sexual exploitation material" or "child sexual abuse material", and we do not consider the term "child pornography" to be an accurate or appropriate description. However, we included this wording in the survey to help ensure all participants clearly understood the subject matter.

Types of content seen

Participants were asked if they had seen content more recently (in the last 12 months) or at some point in the past. The findings discussed in this section use the combined figures, presented in the chart as having 'ever seen' content.

A majority of participants reported seeing graphic or extreme content, some of which may be illegal in New Zealand. Two-thirds (66%) had seen at least one type of content listed, either more recently or in the past. Some had seen multiple types of content – including 38% who had seen three or more, and 19% who had seen five or more.

More than half (56%) had seen some form of content involving graphic or extreme violence and cruelty. For specific categories, 43% had seen graphic violence, extreme cruelty or death involving people, and 43% had seen graphic violence or cruelty to animals.

Just under half (45%) had seen content promoting or encouraging violent or illegal activity. Over a third (36%) had seen content promoting or encouraging acts of violence, 22% had seen content encouraging or instructing people how to commit a crime, and 22% had seen content promoting or encouraging acts of 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%).

Other categories included graphic or explicit suicide content (20%), and graphic or explicit sexual content involving rape, sexual abuse or sexual assault (18%).

Responses represent participants' subjective views about whether content they have seen fits into the categories listed. While it's not possible to say with certainty how much of the content participants reported seeing was illegal, findings suggest that coming across illegal content online may be a common experience for many New Zealanders.

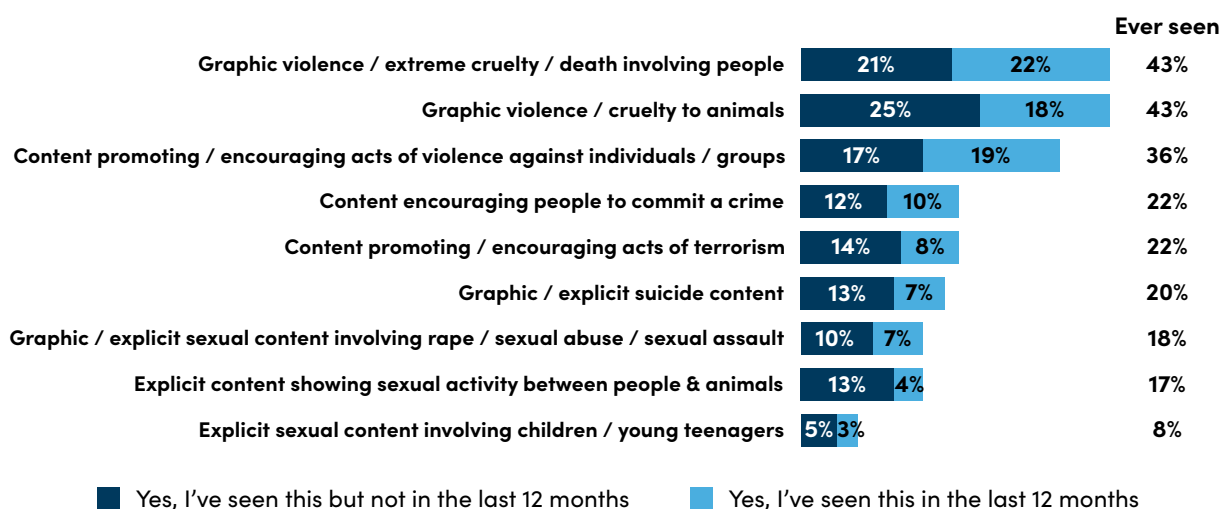
I don't like seeing harmful actions against humans or animals – I can't easily forget what I see and it makes me very sad.

FEMALE, PACIFIC, AGE 55-64

One thing I saw as a high schooler was that many teenagers even around 12 were watching a lot of gore things, including people and animals getting killed. I was not at all interested but there were many teenagers around my age who were very open to these videos.

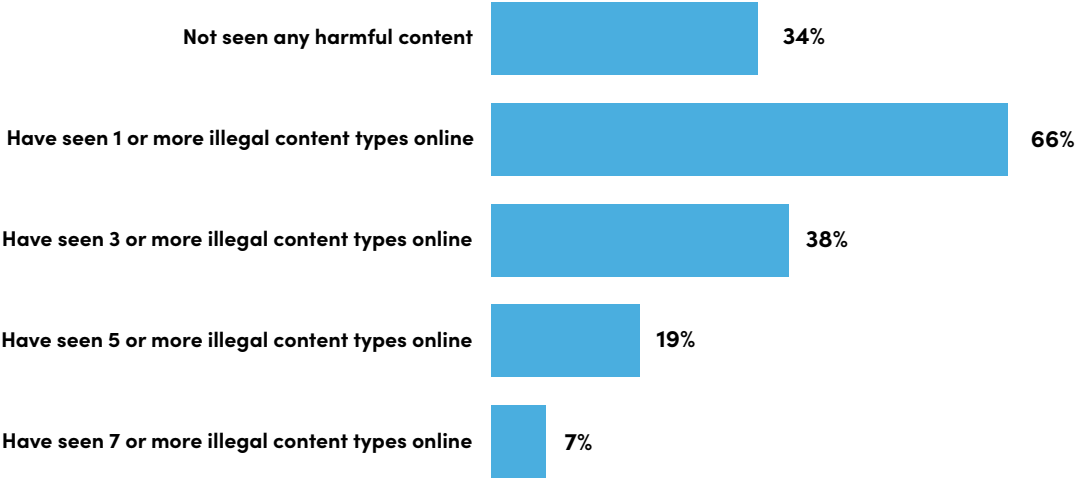
MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, PACIFIC, AGE 18-24

Have you seen any of the following types of content online?



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Number of content types ever seen



Base: Total sample (n=1,000); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Frequency of exposure to content

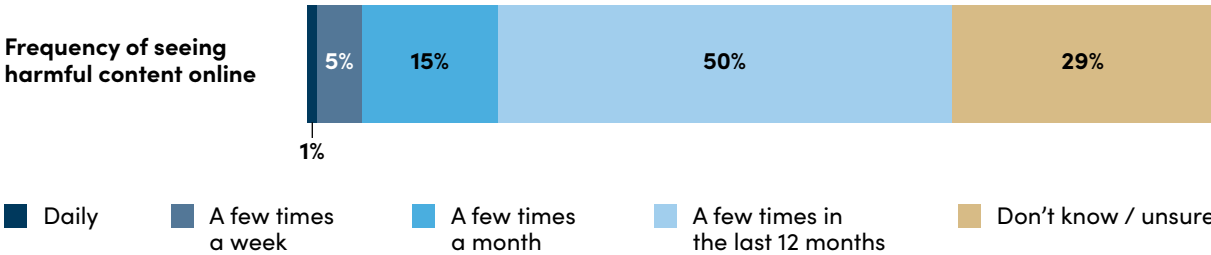
Most encountered this content only occasionally, but some reported more frequent exposure. Results from the question on exposure (see previous section) show that, overall, around 4 in 10 New Zealanders (42%) had seen at least one category of content in the last 12 months.

Of this group, 71% had seen content at least a few times, including (21%) who said they had seen it ‘a few times a month’ or more often.

On a national scale, this equates to just under a third (30%) of New Zealanders having seen such content at least a few times in the past year, and around 1 in 10 (9%) had experienced this ‘a few times a month’ or more often.

Harmful content is too easily accessed.
FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

How often have you seen content like this in the last 12 months (in any category)?



Base: Those who have seen any of the content categories listed (n=405); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

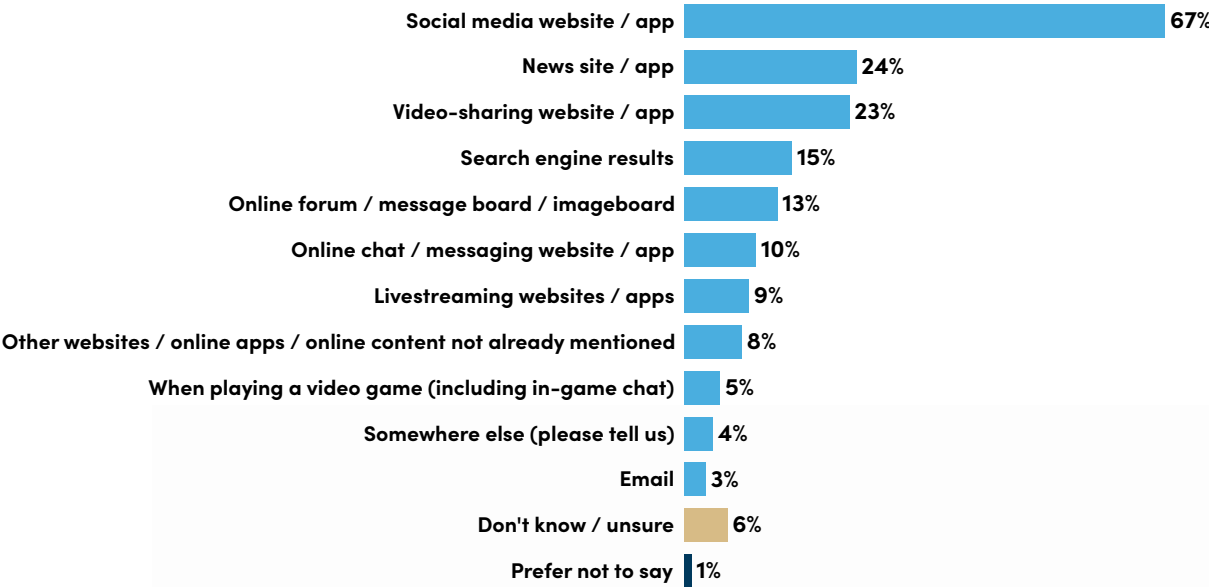
Where people see content

Participants came across this content in a variety of online spaces. Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, the most common place to see it was on social media (67%), followed by news sites/apps (24%) and video-sharing websites/apps (23%).

I actively avoid that sort of thing – I don’t want to be desensitised to horrible things. I do think it should be easy to inform authorities unanimously – some people may want to report it without being involved.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

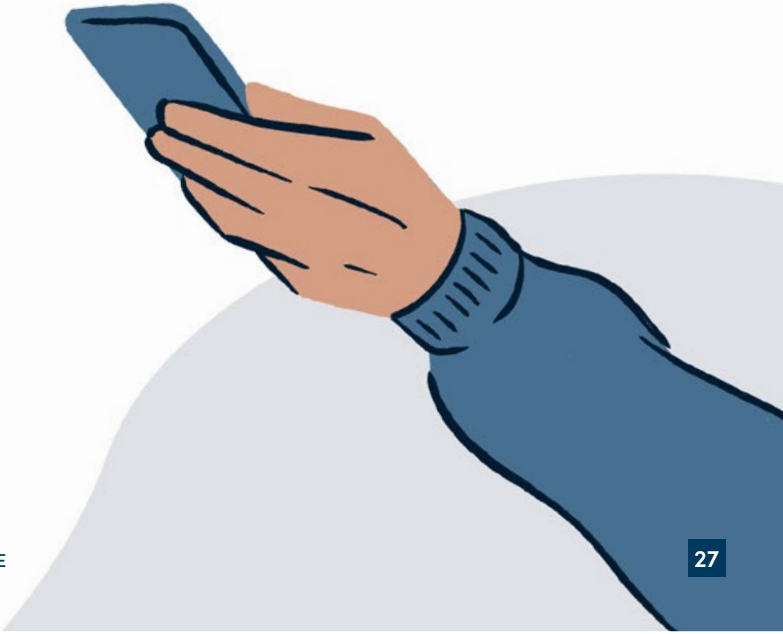
And where have you seen any of these types of content?



Base: Those who saw 1+ content type in the last 12 months (n=405); multiple responses allowed; totals exceed 100%.

It is becoming more prevalent and difficult to avoid. Facebook has bad material coming up in reels which I have had to block.

MALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54



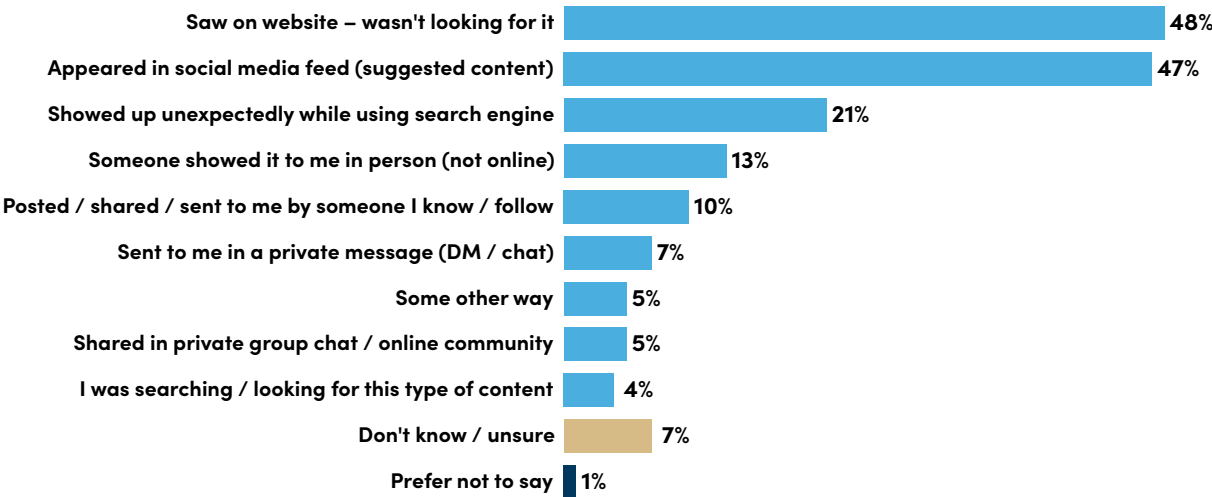
How people see content

People came across this content in a variety of ways, including on social media feeds, via online chats or direct messages, or in person. People tended to come across this content unintentionally, most often on websites or social media. Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, around half (48%) had seen it on a website when they weren't looking for it, and 47% came across it on their social media feed. Just 4% reported actively for searching for this content.

Sometimes keyword searches can accidentally cause harmful content to pop up, especially if there are multiple meanings to words, or contextual differences, or the word has been appropriated by horrible elements of society.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN AND MĀORI, AGE 55-64

In what ways did you see this type of content?



Base: Those who have seen any of the content categories listed (n=405); percentages are weighted, rounding may affect totals.

Impact and response to extreme or illegal content

Follow up questions explored people's responses to seeing this content in the last 12 months, and the impact (if any) this had on them personally. We found that some experienced significant harm from exposure, and many took steps to avoid this content in future.

The impact of exposure

We asked participants if they had experienced any harmful effects from seeing this type of content in the last 12 months – for example, any emotional, psychological, social, financial, or other harmful effects on their daily life. We also asked participants to rate how harmful this was on a scale from 'not at all harmful' to 'extremely harmful'.

Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, 27% said they had personally experienced harm from this exposure. Of this group, just under half (44%) considered this experience to be very or extremely harmful.

On a national scale, these findings show that around 1 in 10 New Zealanders (11%) experienced harm from exposure, and 5% described this as very or extremely harmful.

No, I just try to avoid this harmful content, if something [flashes] suddenly, I am turning it off.

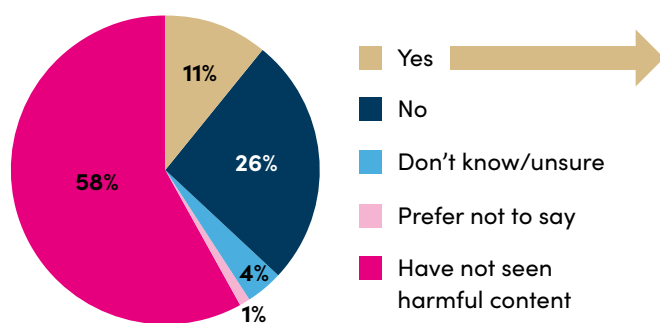
FEMALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54

I have seen some content that was quite harmful and distressing. But I am not comfortable recalling [or] describing it as it hurts a lot.

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 65 YEARS AND OVER

I am deeply concerned about the material and how the online algorithms work when it comes to young people and social media. The rise of people like Andrew Tate etc. and young boys watching his material is concerning as to how they will interact with women and society in future.

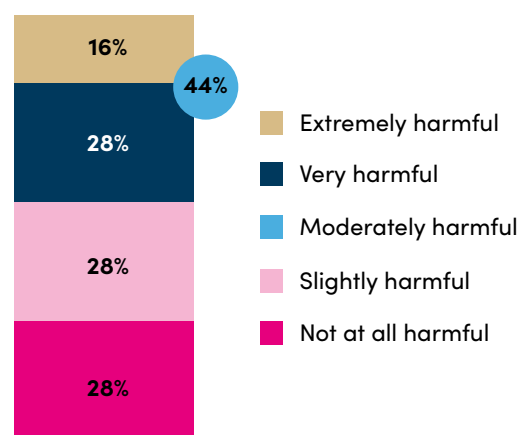
MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44



Experienced harmful effects

Q: Did you experience any harmful effects from seeing this type of content in the last 12 months?

Base: Rebased to total sample (n=1,000). Question base: Those who have seen any of the content categories listed (n=405)



Extent of harm experienced

Q: How harmful was seeing this type of content online for you?

Base: Those who have seen any of the content categories listed and indicated that they have experienced harmful effects (n=102).

How people respond to exposure

Many take active steps to avoid seeing this content. Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, most (74%) had taken one or more actions to avoid or reduce seeing similar content in future. The most common response was to click 'not interested' or 'hide' content (42%), or to report or flag content on the site or app (32%).

Reporting content to an official agency or law enforcement was less common. While some (7%) had reported content to an online safety organisation such as Netsafe, very few reported it to law enforcement (1%) or another government agency (1%).

Not really, but I should be more proactive in reporting it. Just thinking about the victims and the need to be protected. Need to stop the perpetrators.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

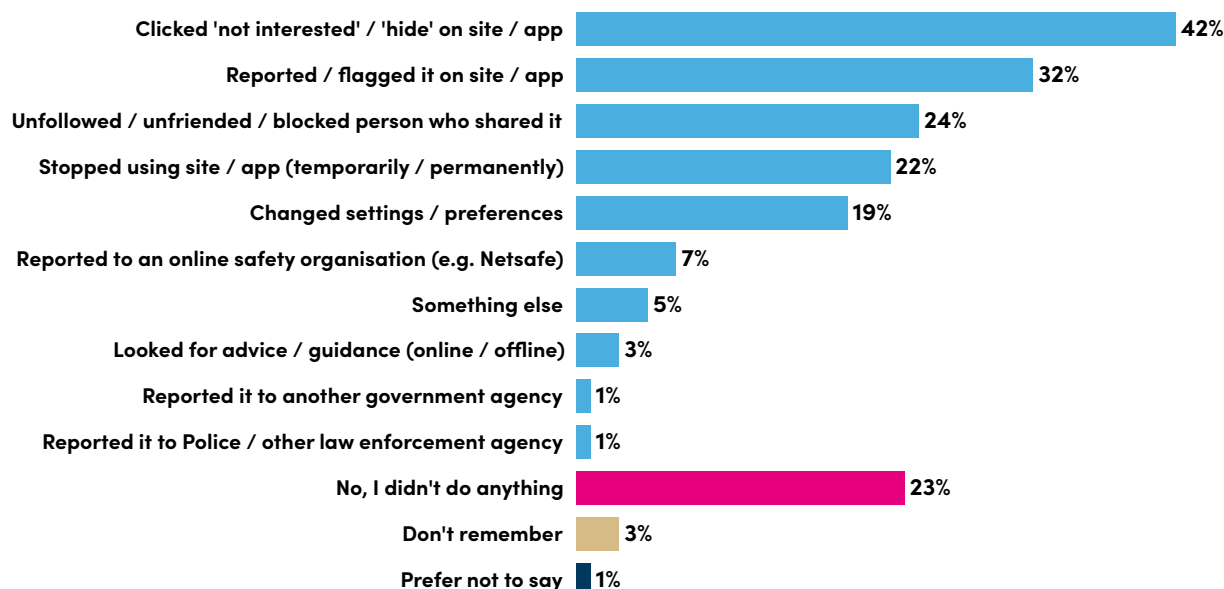
I always mention to my nephews and nieces about what is not acceptable to view online, and explain stranger danger on social media sites to avoid – or if they feel uncomfortable or threatened to tell an adult they trust.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 65 YEARS AND OVER

The amount of fake, bot and scammer accounts are also very high, which plays quite a role in content being shared or posted.

FEMALE, OTHER EUROPEAN AND PACIFIC, AGE 18-24

After seeing this type of content in the last 12 months, what steps, if any, did you take to avoid or reduce seeing similar content in the future?



Base: Those who have seen any of the content categories listed (n=405); multiple responses allowed; totals exceed 100%.

Insights: age, gender and ethnicity

Exposure to extreme or illegal content can happen to anyone, and this experience can have a harmful impact on New Zealanders regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. In general, similarities in how people experienced exposure and its impact tended to be greater than the differences, but significant trends do emerge. In particular, younger New Zealanders are notably more likely to both encounter this content and experience harm as a result.

Differences are statistically significant based on a comparison with the **overall result for all participants** who responded to the question. In the following pages, this is indicated using colour-coding:

Green text: figures are **significantly higher** than the overall result

Red text: figures are **significantly lower** than the overall result

No colour: figures do not indicate **statistically significant** differences

It can be very harmful to younger audiences that now have exposure to so much nowadays. It's important to really try look after them.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 18-24

OVERALL RESULTS FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

QUICK STATS: GENERAL POPULATION FINDINGS

Exposure to extreme or illegal content:

66% have seen one or more types of content

38% have seen 3+

19% have seen 5+

7% have seen 7+

FREQUENCY OF EXPOSURE

In the last 12 months:

42% have seen this content

30% have seen it at least a few times

9% have seen it a few times a month or more often

HARMFUL IMPACT OF EXPOSURE

In the last 12 months:

11% experienced harm from exposure

5% described this as 'very' or 'extremely' harmful

Unless otherwise stated, the findings on exposure combine the figures for seeing content more recently (in the last 12 months) or at some point in the past – meaning results show if people have 'ever seen' these types of content

I remember being quite traumatised by something I saw online when I was about 18. With the ease of access to things wildly more extreme than what I saw, I think it is crucial that children are protected as much as possible from damaging content as it does so much psychological harm.

MALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54.



AGE AND GENDER

Exposure to extreme or illegal content

While participants across all age and gender groups reported seeing graphic or extreme content, exposure is significantly higher among younger adults and tends to be less common with older age groups.

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. While less common, a slight majority of those aged 65+ (51%) had seen at least one type of content.

This trend also held for exposure to multiple types of content, including exposure to...

Three or more content types:

- 18-24-year-olds: 59% (including 77% of men and 51% of women).
- 65+: 19%

Five or more content types:

- 18-24-year-olds: 36% (including 43% of men and 31% of women).
- 65+: 6%

Seven or more content types:

- 18-24-year-olds: 17% (including 17% of men and 15% of women).
- 65+: 3%

Exposure to specific types of content tended to follow this broader pattern, but not necessarily with gender. For example, 45% of 18-29-year-olds had seen graphic suicide content, and this was higher for women (49%) than men (41%). Likewise, 17% of 18-29-year-olds had seen explicit sexual content involving children or young teenagers, with women (18%) more likely to encounter it than men (14%). For comparison, 20% of all participants had seen suicide content, and 8% had seen sexual content involving children or young teens.

Frequency of exposure

Younger adults encounter this content more frequently: 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.

How and where content is seen

Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, the most common place to see it was on social media (67%). This was especially common for younger participants (82% of 18-24-year-olds) and less so for older participants (36% of those aged 65+). Asked about how they came across it, younger adults were also more likely to say it appeared in their social media feed as content: 64% of those aged 18-24 compared with 47% of the general population.

Overall, very few reported actively searching for this content (4% of all participants who had seen content in the last 12 months). While not statistically significant due to the small sample size, the figure was higher for men aged 18-29 (10%).

The harmful impact of exposure

The harmful impact of exposure disproportionately affects women and younger adults. More than a quarter (27%) of 18-24-year-olds have experienced harm in the past year (29% of women vs 21% of men). Women in this age group were also more likely to rate their experience as 'very' or 'extremely' harmful (14%) compared with 11% of men.

Both the incidence and intensity of harm tended to decrease with age. Just 3% of those 65+ experienced harm, and 1% rated this as 'very' or 'extremely' harmful.

Overall, 15% of women reported experiencing harm compared with 7% of men.

Response to seeing content

Younger adults were more likely report or flag content on a website or app. Of those who had seen content in the last 12 months, **50%** of 18-24-year-olds did so, compared with 32% of participants generally. This was less common for older participants aged 65+ (**5%**), who were more likely to stop using a website or app (**38%**) in order to avoid seeing content in future.

ETHNICITY

Exposure, frequency and harmful impact

Exposure to extreme content was reported across all ethnic groups, but was more common for Māori: **79%** had seen at least one type of content, **54%** had seen three or more, **31%** five or more, and **14%** seven or more. Results were also higher for Pacific people, although these figures are not statistically significant due to the smaller sample size (the exception being exposure to seven or more content types: **19%**).

Pacific people and Māori were more likely encounter this content more often: **18%** of Māori had seen content at least a few times a month, and **49%** at least a few times in the past year. Likewise, **21%** of Pacific people had seen content at least a few times a month, and (while not statistically significant) 40% at least a few times in the past year.

Experience of harm from exposure was also more common for Pacific people (**29%**), and both Pacific (**14%**) and Māori (**11%**) participants were more likely than the overall population to rate their experience as 'very' or 'extremely' harmful.

Insights: New Zealanders' views

We gave participants the opportunity to tell us, in their own words, about their experiences with harmful content and any other issues raised by the survey.

Some described how distressing material can appear during everyday online use – through feeds, recommendations, or content shared by others – and the effect this can have on wellbeing. Concerns about children and young people being exposed while online were also common.

Participants described practical strategies to reduce exposure, such as muting, blocking, or stepping away from social media platforms. However, some noted these steps don't always work, particularly when content continues to appear through algorithmic recommendations or re-shares. The selected quotes below provide a snapshot of these experiences and concerns.

I'm not 100% sure I can protect my children from it at the moment but it is a major concern to me and I am actively trying to keep my family safe.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54

While I have not seen any of this myself, I hear stories of kids passing harmful content on to other kids through messenger and showing them at school. This worries me a lot.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

I use the internet in ways that help me to deliberately avoid seeing harmful content online (unfortunately, this doesn't always work, but I manage to avoid the most extreme content).

FEMALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 45-54

Sometimes it just comes on reels even though you don't watch stuff like that. It just appears.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-34

I don't see this content and suspect you need to look for it, then it becomes an algorithm?

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

As a mother I'm constantly concerned about what my teenager is being exposed to online. Although I have restrictions set up on his devices, I'm unsure how reliable these are. Also, I would report illegal content if I knew exactly what type of content illegal and which authorities is to contact.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC, AGE 35-44

I am worried about those that encounter this without the appropriate support. A lot more people - young and old - are using the internet and might not be aware of the tools out there that can help support.

MALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 25-34

If I feel offended or disturbed, I unfollow or block the site/content.

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 45-54

It's quite horrible. Images tend to stay in the mind.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN & PACIFIC, AGE 55-64

Content that Crosses the Line: How survey data reflects insights from young people

In 2025, the Classification Office published a report, "Content that Crosses the Line"¹⁰, based on group consultations with young people aged 12 to their early 20s from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

These qualitative insights into lived experiences served as a primary driver for a subsequent quantitative national survey of the adult population. While the methodologies differ – one focusing on deep-dive personal narratives and the other on broad statistical trends – the consultation insights broadly reflect and provide a youth-centric lens for the survey findings.

Exposure to extreme or illegal content

Both studies suggest that encountering extreme and potentially illegal material is a common experience for many, particularly for younger New Zealanders. The survey provides the statistical scale of this issue, revealing that 82% of 18–24 year olds have seen extreme or illegal content, compared with 66% of adults overall. These figures reflect insights from youth consultations, where a number of participants mentioned seeing material classified as illegal, such as March 15 Mosque attacks livestream.

Conversely, exposure to sexual violence and child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) was less frequently mentioned in consultations and reported by only 8% of survey respondents.

Survey data shows that exposure is significantly higher among younger New Zealanders. Considering these findings it is unsurprising that a number of young people mentioned seeing extreme or illegal content during consultations.

How and why content is seen

Both studies suggest that encountering extreme or illegal content may be a common experience for many, yet it is rarely a deliberate choice.

Very few survey respondents who saw harmful content in the past year sought it out. Rather, they were more likely to come across it on websites while not looking for it, or see it via social media feeds. This mirrors qualitative findings where young people described their encounters as accidental or unwanted, though some noted that curiosity can occasionally drive a transition from passive viewing to active engagement.

Social media algorithms play a decisive role, and the survey shows that younger adults are more likely to encounter content via social media compared with the general population. Youth consultations highlighted a perceived lack of control over these feeds, with some participants noting that even lingering on a post they dislike could trigger the algorithm to recommend increasingly extreme material.

¹⁰ www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources/research/content-that-crosses-the-line

Impact and response

Participants in youth consultations described a spectrum of harm ranging from immediate shock and disgust to long-term anxiety, with some noting that distressing content “stays with them” long after the initial encounter. At the same time, these insights highlighted that the impact of exposure varies significantly depending on the individual, and is shaped by personal, cultural, and social factors.

These insights are consistent with survey findings. While only a minority reported experiencing personal harm from exposure, this harmful impact could be severe for some.

Youth consultations suggested that avoiding extreme and potentially illegal content is challenging for many young people. While young people frequently use active strategies – such as scrolling past uncomfortable videos or using platform features like ‘not interested’ – they often view these measures as only partially effective.

The survey revealed a similar pattern – most adults who recently encountered this content took action to avoid it in the future, and the most common method was to click ‘not interested’ or hide the content within the website or app.

Finally, a disconnect exists regarding trust in platforms. While many adults we surveyed expressed some level of trust in platforms to remove illegal content, participants in youth consultations were far more sceptical – often viewing reporting tools as largely ineffective.

Ultimately, both studies suggest that unintentional exposure to extreme content has become a fact of life for many New Zealanders – and those in younger age groups are most affected.



Next steps

What this means for New Zealand

The findings of this survey reinforce that exposure to illegal content is not a marginal issue. It is occurring across communities and age groups, often unintentionally, and within an increasingly complex online environment.

The Classification Office has a unique statutory role in regulating illegal and extremely harmful content. Our responsibility is to support New Zealanders by helping communities understand legal boundaries, recognise broader harms, and navigate a system designed to prevent harm.

A public health approach to prevention

Our work is grounded in a public health approach to online harm. This means focusing on reducing the availability of illegal content, preventing exposure where possible, and ensuring people know where to turn if they encounter harmful material.

Using insights from this survey, alongside ongoing engagement with young people, whānau, educators, community leaders, and other agencies and organisations, we continue to build and strengthen a multilayered prevention strategy.

This approach recognises that no single intervention is sufficient. Effective prevention requires regulation, classification, education and technology working together.

I'm of an age and maturity to be able to protect myself emotionally if I accidentally come across harmful content online. However, I do have serious concerns about young kids' exposure to harmful content, and how that would affect their mental health. It is crucial for the government to put in more safe guarding policies in place to protect our youngs.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN AND ASIAN, AGE 35-44

Reporting harmful and illegal content

Reporting mechanisms are a critical part of the system that help limit the spread of illegal and extremely harmful material.

Clear pathways exist to report harmful or illegal content, including through online platforms, the Department of Internal Affairs and the New Zealand Police. Reporting supports early intervention, helps identify emerging harms, and contributes to broader efforts to reduce its availability.

When people encounter harmful, distressing, or illegal content online, reporting is a practical way to protect their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. It helps ensure harmful material is not further shared and that the appropriate agencies are able to take action. Support services and helplines also play an important role in harm minimisation and recovery.

Every report contributes to safer online spaces, supports accountability, and helps protect individuals, whānau, and communities. Whether content is hosted in New Zealand or overseas, there are agencies in New Zealand equipped to respond and provide support.

I think [should] it be made more public where to report illegal things you see on the internet. IRD for example ask you to forward spam emails that I receive to them, so they can trace it. Something like that would be good to know about, if you do see something illegal online

FEMALE, OTHER EUROPEAN, AGE 55-64

I think educating people the right channel of reporting illegal content is very important, so more people are aware of these and illegal content can be reduced.

MALE, ASIAN, AGE 25-34

It could be useful to have some sort of government campaign to promote how & when you should report this sort of thing.

FEMALE, NZ EUROPEAN, AGE 35-44

Classification as a protective tool

Classification remains a core mechanism for protecting New Zealanders and providing clarity about what is legal, illegal, or age-restricted.

Objectionable content – including text, video, images, and audio – is banned by law in New Zealand, meaning it's illegal to possess, share, or create. This includes content promoting things like extreme violence, sexual violence, child sexual exploitation, or terrorism. While certain content is clearly illegal, other material may be harmful and come close to the legal threshold without crossing it. The role of the Classification Office is to provide expert assessment and determine what crosses the legal line.

Classification mitigates harm by providing clear guidance to the public about the types of content that are illegal. It also supports informed decision-making, underpins enforcement action, and contributes to broader prevention efforts.

Strengthening forensic classification capability

The survey findings align with what we are seeing in our forensic classification work: an increase in both the volume and complexity of illegal and extremely harmful material being identified and submitted.

The Classification Office has continued to strengthen specialist forensic capability to assess this material safely, consistently, and efficiently. This work supports law enforcement, regulatory partners, and the justice system by providing timely and authoritative determinations about the legal status of content.

Disrupting harm with technology

We have implemented technology that applies a unique identifier to classified publications, an internationally recognised method for creating digital fingerprints of illegal material.

This technology allows information about content classified as objectionable to be recorded, searched for, and shared without storing or circulating the original material. This supports faster identification and removal of harmful content, both domestically and internationally, and strengthens collaboration with trusted partners.

This work contributes to reducing the re-circulation of known harmful material and protecting victims from further harm.

Our future focus

Building on these findings, we continue to focus on strengthening prevention and support across the system. This includes:

- Developing and expanding practical resources for rangatahi, whānau, educators, youth workers, and communities
- Delivering social and awareness campaigns to increase understanding of illegal content, its risks, and where to get help or report concerns
- Continuing professional development initiatives to support those working directly with young people
- Ongoing engagement, research, and monitoring to respond to emerging harms and trends.

Resources to support this work are available on our website:

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources

I think an introduction/education to public on what contents are illegal in New Zealand and what punishment will be if people post the illegal contents online will be helpful to reduce the illegal breach.

FEMALE, ASIAN, AGE 45-54

Helplines and reporting guide

Not sure what to do when you or someone else comes across extreme or potentially illegal content?

If you've seen anything harmful that's sticking in your mind, there are helplines and support services in Aotearoa you can reach out to.

Reporting it helps to protect you, your whānau, and others, supports safer online spaces, and ensures the right agencies can act – whether the content is hosted in New Zealand or overseas.

Save this page, share it with friends, pin it up in a shared space (bathrooms are great), or include it in a newsletter. You're not alone – help is just a call or message away.

Helplines

Need to talk but unsure where to start? These free, confidential helplines are here to support you:



Free call Youthline **0800 376 633** or **text 234** to talk with someone from a safe and youth-centred organisation.



Free call or **text 1737** any time for support from a trained counsellor.



Free call OutLine Aotearoa **0800 688 5463** from 6pm to 9pm any evening to talk to trained volunteers from Aotearoa's rainbow communities.



For eating disorders support, contact the Eating Disorders Association of New Zealand (EDANZ) helpline on **0800 2 EDANZ / 0800 233 269** or at info@ed.org.nz



Free call Safe to Talk **0800 044 334**, **text 4334** or live chat to talk with someone about sexual harm. www.safetotalk.nz



Wellstop is an organisation that aims to eliminate harmful sexual behaviour in our communities. Contact online: www.wellstop.org.nz/enquiries-and-contact.html

Where to report content in New Zealand

If you come across material that you believe may be illegal or harmful, you can report it:



Child sexual exploitation material, extremist or terrorist videos or propaganda, or other extreme or potentially illegal content.
Report directly to the Department of Internal Affairs.



Harmful online behaviour
If someone is harassing you online, sharing intimate images without consent, or engaging in harmful digital communication, you can report it to Netsafe.

How to report to platforms

Most social media platforms and websites have reporting tools. Using them can help remove content that is extreme or potentially illegal.

Go to our website to report:

Reporting is important but so is protecting your own space.

Blocking, unfollowing, or using options like 'not interested', 'hide', 'mute', or 'see less like this' can help keep your feed safer and train the platform's algorithm to show you less of that type of content in future.



Questions about harmful content and the law

For information and guidance on harmful or illegal content check out the Classification Office's range of resources on our website (www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/resources) for parents, whānau, and young people.

Or if you have any questions, you can get in touch with the Office via email.

Email: info@classificationoffice.govt.nz

Whether it's for yourself or someone else, reaching out can make a real difference. A conversation, a report, or a quick call to a helpline can help keep you safer online and in real life.

If you are in immediate danger or need urgent help, call 111 for the NZ Police.

Appendix:

Exposure to content survey question

This appendix includes the full question about exposure including content categories. See our website [\[link\]](#) for a more detailed overview of how this question was asked, and additional context and information on interpreting the findings.

Intro to section

This section is about types of content that can sometimes cross a legal line and might be banned in New Zealand. People can come across this type of content by accident and we are just wanting to see how common this is regardless of how or where you might have seen it.

Your answers will help us understand how common it is for people to come across this type of content.

Remember, your answers are anonymous, and if you're not comfortable answering just select 'prefer not to say'.

ASK ALL

This question is about things like images, videos, or other content you might have seen online – for example, posted on social media, on video sharing sites, or on other websites. It's not about commercial entertainment like movies or TV shows.

This content can include real-life images or video, and also content that is computer generated, created by AI, cartoon illustrations, animations, or other types of content.

OU5. Have you seen any of the following types of content online?

[SINGLE RESPONSE FOR EACH]

1. Yes, I've seen this **in the last 12 months**
2. Yes, I've seen this but **not** in the last 12 months
3. No, I've never seen this
4. Don't know/unsure
5. Prefer not to say

[Randomised List – except final 2 categories.]

- Graphic violence, extreme cruelty or death involving people.
(Examples of this might include graphic video or images of a mass-shooting, executions.)
- Graphic violence or cruelty to animals.
- Graphic or explicit sexual content involving rape, sexual abuse or sexual assault.
(Examples might include recordings of real-life sexual assault, or content that explicitly encourages acts of sexual violence and rape. This is not about commercially produced adult pornography.)
- Graphic or explicit suicide content.
(Examples of this might include someone recording their own death, or material that encourages people to take their own life.)
- Content that encourages people to commit a crime.
(Examples might include instructions and encouragement to manufacture illegal drugs or build a bomb.)
- Content promoting or encouraging acts of violence against individuals or groups.
(Examples of this might include written documents or video footage linked to acts of violence.)
- Content promoting or encouraging acts of terrorism.
(Examples of this might include written documents or video footage linked to acts of terrorism.)

[Fixed categories]

- Explicit content showing sexual activity between people and animals (bestiality).
- Explicit sexual content involving children or young teenagers.
(This is sometimes called “child sexual exploitation material” or “child pornography”).

The background of the entire page is a dark blue color. Scattered across this background are numerous squares of varying sizes and shades of blue. Some squares are a very dark blue, matching the background, while others are a medium blue or a light, vibrant blue. These squares are arranged in a non-uniform, abstract pattern, with some appearing in small groups and others in isolation. The overall effect is a modern, digital aesthetic.

Classification Office

TE MANA WHAKAATU

www.classificationoffice.govt.nz