

[Home](#) » [Briefing Room](#) » [Justice News](#)

JUSTICE NEWS

Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the National Law Enforcement Training on Child Exploitation

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Thank you, Sally, for your kind words, for your outstanding service as United States Attorney, and for your leadership in protecting children all across – and far beyond – the Northern District of Georgia.

This work is among our most critical responsibilities. And I am grateful for the contributions you have made – and the commitment you have signaled – in reaching out to young people, all across the country, who are currently at risk and – in far too many cases – in desperate need of our help. I also want to thank each of you for the time that you have taken, and the sacrifices that you have made, to be here in Atlanta for this unprecedented training conference. And I want to recognize my colleagues across the Justice Department who helped to organize this event and develop a comprehensive, cutting-edge agenda – especially Deputy Attorney General, Jim Cole; Acting Administrator for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Melodee Hanes; and the National Coordinator for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction Strategy, Paul Almanza. As the Deputy Attorney General, and so many others, have mentioned already – this gathering provides a unique and welcome opportunity – to advance our common goals, and to more effectively meet our shared obligations.

By bringing together so many law enforcement officials, advocates, investigators, and prosecutors – more than 1,700 in total – not only are we raising awareness about the problems of child exploitation – we also are sending a powerful message: that, when it comes to keeping our children from harm, a new era of collaboration has begun.

It's encouraging to see so many key allies – as well as local, state, federal, tribal, and even international partners – in one place, eager to forge and to strengthen vital relationships; to share information and best practices; to strengthen our most successful initiatives, such as the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces and Project Safe Childhood coalitions; and, ultimately, to take our efforts to prevent and reduce child exploitation to a new level.

Although you play a variety of roles and work in many different regions, with your collective efforts, you are keeping our nation's most sacred pledge, and helping to fulfill the Justice Department's most critical missions: ensuring security and opportunity for our children, and justice for all.

As everyone here knows, this work isn't easy. In fact – in this time of growing demands and limited resources – your jobs have never been more difficult. But your efforts – to protect children in need and at risk, to support juvenile victims, and to safeguard our young people from exploitation, abuse, trafficking, sexual violence, and online threats – have never been more urgent.

Since the launch of Project Safe Childhood six years ago, investigations and prosecutions of child exploitation crimes have increased dramatically. Unfortunately, we've also seen an historic rise in the distribution of child pornography, in the number of images being shared online, and in the level of violence associated with child exploitation and sexual abuse crimes. Tragically, the only place we've seen a decrease is in the age of victims.

This is alarming. And it is unacceptable. But – as every community, every family, and every child can be assured – we are fighting back. And our enforcement, engagement, and outreach efforts are making a meaningful, measureable difference.

I know that, this afternoon, you've already discussed the impact of successful, collaborative law enforcement efforts like Operation Minotaur and Operation Delego – and the outstanding work that's being done by the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section within the Justice Department's Criminal Division – as well as some of the critical prosecutions that have been advanced by our network of U.S. Attorneys Offices.

Because of the tireless work of many of the people in this very room, in recent years, we have brought a record number of offenders to justice – and we're aggressively, effectively targeting the most dangerous, non-compliant sex offenders. We've also taken unprecedented steps to engage community members, parents, teachers, electronic service providers, and international partners in this work. As a result, we've seen remarkable success in identifying and shutting down child pornography rings that span across the globe.

We've also improved the public's ability to report child exploitation crimes – through our Project Safe Childhood website, as well as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline – which, since it was established in 1998, has processed more than one million complaints. And, over the last 18 months, the Department has taken important steps to implement the recommendations outlined in the groundbreaking National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction that we submitted to Congress in August of 2010. Through this framework, we are formalizing key partnerships; streamlining our education, prevention, and prosecution activities; improving information sharing and collaboration; and making the most effective use of limited resources. And we are applying two of the key lessons that our law enforcement efforts have made clear in recent years: that our focus must expand beyond enforcement and prosecutions to include proven prevention and deterrence efforts; and that protecting our children means addressing all federal offenses that involve the exploitation of young people – not just Internet-facilitated crimes.

Today, we know that criminals will go to just about any lengths to evade the law – and, so long as that's the case, we need to use every appropriate tool and available resource to enforce it. That's why, last year, I approved the expansion of Project Safe Childhood beyond the online crimes it was initially created to address. As a result, we're now utilizing cutting-edge technologies alongside traditional methods of enforcement and recovery to improve our odds of catching those who prey upon our children – and to more effectively leverage the capacity of our law enforcement partners, as well as the broad network of nonprofits actively engaged in the fight against child exploitation and abuse.

This approach is paying off. But we need to invite even more partners – from across the public and private sectors – to join us in this fight, and to enlist passionate private citizens who can help bring untapped resources to bear.

That's why training opportunities like this conference are – and will continue to be – vital to our success.

Across the country, we are seeing – and you are proving – that we can win the fight against child exploitation. But only if we remain focused and engaged, and only if we consistently seek out ways to build upon the momentum we've created – and to help the young people who need us most.

For their sake, let us keep up the conversation we've begun here today – and let us continue our critical work. The future of our great nation demands this. And our children deserve nothing less.

Thank you.