

**27 AUGUST 2021**

## **Netsafe prepares for an influx of online harm incidents**

**We are staying connected with the internet – but keeping safe online will be challenging**

Aotearoa's online safety organisation is anticipating calls to its helpline to skyrocket as the country heads into its second weekend at Alert Level 4.

"Everybody is using the internet more frequently during this period," says Martin Cocker, Netsafe CEO. "The more we use the internet, the more we're exposed to online risks and challenges."

Cocker says while being online keeps us connected with loved ones and ensures the community can continue learning, working and being entertained, "we also know this a time criminals try to exploit individuals and a time when frustrations boil over online".

Netsafe is already seeing incident reports increasing as it did during New Zealand's March – April 2020 Alert Level 4 Lockdown.

When that period was compared to the same time a year before, scam reports were up 74 percent, sextortion 35 percent and romance scams 69 percent.

During last year's Lockdown, Cocker says Netsafe was inundated with requests from people needing support with a wide range of issues, including online bullying, misinformation, threatening behaviour, and hate speech.

"As the country works to stamp out COVID-19, Netsafe is helping people to keep safe and stamp out online harm from their lives. There is enough happening right now without people dealing with being bullied, ripped off or harassed."

Reports to Netsafe about intimidation during the 2020 Lockdown increased by 45 percent and the supply and distribution of objectionable content by 66 percent.

Netsafe research into 2020's Lockdown reveals the number of individuals experiencing unwanted digital communications – including being threatened or intimidated – increased.

In the three months before Lockdown, of those who experienced unwanted digital communications, 45 percent were encouraged to try and hurt themselves. This increased to 65 percent in the three months. Similarly, 41 percent experienced offensive comments about their lifestyle or religious beliefs before Lockdown, but this increased to 54 percent during or after the period.

Netsafe is available seven days to provide expert incident advice and can provide advice about how the Harmful Digital Communications Act may apply to their situation. The service is free, confidential and non-judgemental - translation options are also available. People can call 0508 NETSAFE (0508 638 723) or visit [netsafe.org.nz](https://netsafe.org.nz) for self-help advice.

Last Lockdown, demand for Netsafe's online resources shot up by 167 percent as people looked for tips on what they could do themselves to have more positive experiences and protect their personal information.

Netsafe also saw a 155 percent increase in parents seeking help with online issues for their families. Cocker says this time round, a range of tools have been added to Netsafe's stable of resources for whānau once again getting used to home-schooling and kids spending more time on screens.

The *Online Safety Parent Toolkit*, can be used as a stand-alone resource or in conjunction with the *TikTok Family Safety Toolkit* and its *Online Gaming Whānau Toolkit*.

In addition, Netsafe's *Staying Safe Online Guide* can be downloaded. The easy-to-understand handbook helps everyone – including seniors – have better online experiences across many platforms and provides tips to avoid scams and deal with bullying and harassment.

**-ENDS-**

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## **About Netsafe**

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

## **Netsafe's tips to help stay connected and stay safe**

1. **Do a stocktake:** Assess how many devices in your house connect to the internet to understand where the risks are and start to mitigate them.
2. **Assess new technology:** Investigate new apps or platforms by checking out T&Cs, reviews and minimum age requirements before using them.
3. **Secure your virtual house:** Use strong passwords, update your software and use two-factor authentication where possible.
4. **Share your experience:** Talk to your friends and family about the technologies you use and let them know your tips and tricks to eliminate risk.
5. **Combat misinformation:** Guide people to official information sources like [covid19.govt.nz](https://covid19.govt.nz) for the latest advice.
6. **See something, say something:** If you see suspicious or criminal activity online, report it. If you don't know where to report, visit [netsafe.org.nz](https://netsafe.org.nz) for guidance.
7. **Practice safe clicking:** COVID-19 is being used as a lure so be careful clicking on links, attachments or ads from unknown sources as they might be hiding malware.
8. **Protect your info:** Criminals are harvesting personal information. Stop and think carefully about the details you disclose or whether they need to be entered online.
9. **Have fun:** Explore the technologies available to help you connect, learn, stay informed and participate in Aotearoa's new virtual society.
10. **Help others:** Share your online safety tips and experiences with your bubble.

## **About the Harmful Digital Communications Act**

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

The 10 Communication Principles state that digital communication should not:

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

## About Netsafe's research

Netsafe conducted a nationwide study to understand the prevalence of unwanted digital communications in New Zealand during the nationwide COVID-19 Lockdown. As the Lockdown got underway, the number of reports about harmful digital communications that Netsafe's call centre received began to increase, with this trend continuing after the Lockdown period, Netsafe wanted to find out more.

This study explores the experiences of unwanted digital communication in the last 12 months, just before, during, and after Lockdown. A total of 1,150 people participated in the study and represented the population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, religion and region. The findings from the study provide a source of robust information for researchers and policymakers seeking to learn lessons about the pandemic. More information is available at [netsafe.org.nz/covid19](https://netsafe.org.nz/covid19).

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

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

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

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

*Note: Participants were allowed multiple responses.*