

Online porn blamed as children aged just FIVE are quizzed over sex offences

- **More than 5,000 investigations launched over the past three years**
- **NSPCC blames figures on hardcore porn readily available online**
- **Number of sex offences by under-18s risen 38 per cent since 2009/10**

By Daniel Martin

Worrying: Children's charity the NSPCC has found children as young as five are being reported to the police over sex offences, and it blames online pornography for a rise in under-18s accused of crimes (file picture)

Children as young as five are being reported to the police over sex offences, a charity warned last night.

The NSPCC blamed the shocking statistics on the growing ease of access to online pornography that 'warps' young people's minds.

More than 5,000 formal investigations have been launched over the past three years into under-18s accused of crimes including rape and sexual assault, according to statistics obtained by the charity.

It blamed the rise on hardcore porn that is readily available on the internet, warping youngsters' ideas about sex and relationships.

The NSPCC's findings reveal that the number of sex offences allegedly committed by under-18s has gone up 38 per cent from 1,432 in 2009/10 to 1,978 in 2011/12.

It means that every day police are dealing with at least five children accused of sex offences. But the startling numbers may be the tip of the iceberg because many police forces – including some of the biggest such as the Metropolitan Police – did not reply to the charity's Freedom of Information request.

Three of the forces that did respond – Humberside, Cambridgeshire and Avon and Somerset – said their youngest cases of 'harmful sexual behaviour' had involved children aged five.

Others reported cases of youngsters aged six, seven or eight being questioned. Because they are under ten, the age of criminal responsibility, these children cannot be charged.

It is not known what offences the youngest children were accused of committing, but harmful sexual behaviour ranges from indecent exposure and inappropriate touching at one end of the scale, to rape and sexual assault at the other.

It also covers forcing and coercing other people into watching or taking part in inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviour. The NSPCC said it was likely the youngest children were guilty of the less serious offences, or were victims of abuse who were copying behaviour to which they had been subjected.

The Daily Mail has been calling for an automatic block on adult material on the web as part of its Block Online Porn campaign.

Ministers have pledged to introduce a less stringent filtering system for all new computers, but no timetable has yet been imposed on internet service providers, meaning children are still at risk.

Increase: The charity's findings reveal the number of sex offences allegedly committed by under-18s has gone up 38 per cent from 1,432 in 2009/10 to 1,978 in 2011/12 (file picture)

Only last week, a 15-year-old boy was convicted of raping a 14-year-old girl after becoming obsessed with online porn. The girl was bound, gagged, beaten up and raped as he tried to re-enact sadistic scenes he had viewed on the internet.

Her father demanded ministers take action to protect children from adult material online, particularly the 'extreme violent nature' of some easily accessible sites.

But the NSPCC's figures show that the situation is more widespread than it was thought, and is getting worse.

Claire Lilley, policy adviser at the NSPCC, said: 'We hope our findings will ring alarm bells with the authorities that this is a problem which needs urgent attention. In some cases older children are attacking younger ones and in other cases it's sexual violence within a teenage relationship.'

Campaign: The Daily Mail has been calling for an automatic block on adult material on the web as part of its Block Online Porn campaign (file picture)

'While more research needs to be done on this problem, we know that technology and easy access to sexual material is warping young people's views of what is normal or acceptable behaviour.

'We are treating an increasing number of children who have carried out online grooming, harassment in chatrooms and "sexting".'

John Carr, from the Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety, said: 'It's very alarming to realise that children as young as five are being caught up in the consequences of the sexualisation of modern Britain.

'The impact of this on a child of five will potentially live with them and scar them for the rest of their lives.'

The scale of sexual offences committed by children was revealed after the NSPCC approached all 43 police forces in England and Wales, and received responses from 34 of them. A total of 5,028 offences categorised as 'harmful sexual behaviour' were recorded between 2009/10 and 2011/12 where the perpetrator was under 18.

West Midlands, Greater Manchester and the Metropolitan Police in London were among those unable to give data – meaning the real total will be far higher.

Figures from those that did respond show that 98 per cent of the 4,562 offenders were boys. And where the relationship was recorded, at least three out of five of the victims knew the abuser.

More than one third of the offences were said to have been committed by a family friend or acquaintance, and one in five by family members.

The NSPCC, which provides treatment to help reform children who exhibit signs of harmful sexual behaviour, said easy access to indecent material may be behind the increase in the numbers being treated.

Miss Lilley said: 'Evidence shows that most young people who receive behaviour-changing treatment early on will not continue to sexually abuse others or grow into adult offenders.'

The largest number of offences was recorded by Avon and Somerset police, with 633 over the past three years, closely followed by Humberside on 595.

Next was Suffolk with 351 offences, followed by South Wales, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Northumbria, which each recorded 250 or more offences.

Last year Sue Berelowitz, the deputy children's commissioner, told MPs that online porn was turning children into sex attackers.

She said: 'It has definitely affected children's thresholds of what they think is normal.