

Early Warning Notification

Animal cruelty in online communities

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Europol Operations Directorate
OAC, ECTC

Background

The Internet and its evolving digital infrastructure have facilitated the rise of online individuals and networks that advocate for or engage in criminal and violent activities. Operating with global reach, these actors often function in a decentralised way across various encrypted platforms and groups, thereby making them difficult to detect and disrupt.

Europol has previously highlighted the online circulation of violent content regarding children¹ and women², but also notes a presence and suspected rise in animal cruelty material. This illustrates again that crime is increasingly nurtured online³. In addition to being illegal, animal cruelty acts may also indicate a risk of escalating violent behaviour or suggest a shift in focus within existing violent online communities and affiliated groups.

What is happening?

Europol has noted a presence and potential rise in articles and online content depicting animal cruelty, targeting e.g., cats, dogs, rabbits or monkeys, and involving disturbing methods such as electric shocks and drowning. Since animals are sentient beings, animal cruelty is in direct violation to the animal welfare legislative framework across the EU.

Animal cruelty may also lead to escalating violent behaviour. Animal cruelty has been documented as a vetting and desensitisation tool within extremist, criminal and cult-like communities. These acts serve to erode moral boundaries, test loyalty, strengthen group cohesion, produce content and/or toughen new or younger members. Europol information illustrates that violent online communities may encourage animal cruelty as an entry point to more serious violence, including against humans. Such behaviour can drive further radicalisation and escalate violent tendencies.

Law enforcement agencies generally view animal cruelty as a warning sign of potential progression to severe crimes, including terrorism and violence against people. Individuals or groups who normalise and spread these acts not only engage in illegal and morally reprehensible behaviour, but may also be on a trajectory toward greater violence and extremism.

¹ Europol, Intelligence Notification 06/2025 (Public), The rise of online cult communities dedicated to extremely violent child abuse.

² Europol, Early Warning Notification 2025/021 (BPL), Propagation of sexual violence against women in online communities

³ Europol, 18 March 2025, European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2025, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/EU-SOCTA-2025.pdf>

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Acts of animal cruelty may also signal a shift in focus within existing violent online communities. These behaviours could indicate the emergence of new subgroups, fragmentation or the involvement of external actors who are adopting increasingly extreme methods. The use of animal cruelty may represent a deliberate escalation in tactics or a shift in focus, possibly reflecting changes in the group's ideology, cohesion, or objectives. This, on its turn, could lead to further radicalisation and an escalation of violence.

What we want to know from you

The cross-border and online nature of these communities implies that prevention, intelligence gathering, and disruption efforts are not confined to national borders. Early detection of animal cruelty - as a potential precursor to more severe violence or changes in behaviour within violent online groups – requires proactive information sharing, collaborative analysis, and coordinated responses among law enforcement agencies both within the EU and internationally.

Member States and Operational Partners are encouraged to provide Europol with relevant information concerning cases of animal cruelty linked to online communities or violent extremist individuals or groups. This may include details on:

- The perpetrators and their possible violent history
- Modus operandi
- The online platforms involved and the content shared by the perpetrators
- Perpetrators' motivations
- Indications of the involvement of networks (online communities, ideological groups)
- Indications that animal cruelty may escalate to violence against humans
- Motives of such networks (ideology, intent to destabilise)

Please send any relevant information or strategic reports to Europol via SIENA using the specific string used for this Early Warning Notification.



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