DISRUPTING HARM

DATA INSIGHT 8

www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm

WHO PERPETRATES ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

unicef
Office of Research-Innocenti

About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm*

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by the End Violence Fund through its Safe Online Initiative. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through *Disrupting Harm* in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations developed together with national stakeholders. Country reports can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF are used as the basis for the *Disrupting Harm* Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organisation(s) that produced each brief. While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

Disrupting Harm data show that across 11 countries:

- **Children who have experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse are likely to have already known the perpetrator.**
- **While friends and others known to the child are the most common type of perpetrator on average, family members and unknown people are the most common in some countries.**
- **As many as one in three children did not report to the survey who the perpetrator was.**
- **There are clear differences between countries in respect of perpetrators. For example, in Cambodia, 53% of children reported that the perpetrator was a family member, while in Malaysia, 63% of children reported that the perpetrator was someone unknown.**
- **When developing prevention strategies, educational efforts and societal responses, it is important to consider the wide variety of people who may abuse children, including friends and acquaintances.**

For one of its research activities, *Disrupting Harm* gathered insights directly from children and young people through a household survey on a range of different experiences that can constitute online sexual exploitation and abuse. Between December 2020 and April 2021, nationally representative random samples of approximately 1,000 children aged 12–17 years were obtained from each of seven countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and six countries in Southeast Asia. Data are presented from approximately 11,000 children in 11 countries, on their self-reported experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse.[1]

1. Data from South Africa and Viet Nam were excluded due to a lack of comparability and the limited size of the sub-samples. The sample of approximately 1,000 children in each country was a stratified random cluster sample with a random walk within clusters. Children were randomly selected at household level if they were aged 12–17 and had used the internet at least once in the past three months.

Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Situations involving *digital, internet* and *communication technologies* at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

Funded by End Violence Against Children

Children face the risk of violence in digital spaces, just as they do in school or within families or communities. Bullying, hate speech, grooming, sexual exploitation and abuse can occur via social media, online gaming or direct digital messaging. These apps and platforms also facilitate in-person sexual exploitation and abuse – convoluting an already complex issue.

Identifying the most common perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse can better inform national and global prevention and response strategies.[2]

Approximately 11,000 children from 11 countries were asked whether, in the past year prior to being surveyed, they had:

- encountered someone who had offered them money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos
- been asked by someone online to meet in person to do something sexual
- sexual images of themselves shared without their permission
- been threatened or blackmailed online to engage in sexual activities.

If children had had any of these experiences in the past year, they were asked if they knew who the perpetrator was when the abuse last happened.[3]

Respondents were presented with four perpetrator categories:

- a friend or someone else they knew who was aged over 18
- a friend or someone else they knew who was aged under 18
- a family member
- a romantic or ex-partner.

Children could also indicate that they did not know who the perpetrator was at the time of the abuse, by reporting either "Someone I did not know before this happened" or "I do not know who the person was".

The findings presented here represent the experiences of the approximately 1,050 children in our sample who were subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to the survey.

What do we now know about perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse?

While a common stereotype is that strangers are the main perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, children's responses reveal that these acts are more often committed by people they know.

Across the 11 countries, most children already knew the perpetrator – a friend, acquaintance, family member or romantic partner. Only in 2 of the 11 countries (Malaysia and the Philippines) was the perpetrator more often someone unknown to the child. This finding is in line with a considerable body of evidence relating to other forms of violence against children[4] and an emerging body of evidence for online violence against children.[5] People unknown to the child were particularly common perpetrators when the child experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse on social media platforms.

Children's responses show that older friends or people they knew (aged over 18) were the most common perpetrators overall, followed by younger friends or people they knew (below age 18). This was the case for all forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse considered in the study.

However, given the considerable variation in reported perpetrators between countries (see Table 1), tailored prevention and response strategies are needed.

2. The authors recognise that the terminology around offending, perpetration and facilitation of online child sexual exploitation and abuse is complex and can be understood differently in different jurisdictions and by different organisations.

3. This analysis only includes responses clearly indicating online child sexual exploitation and abuse that would generally, in most jurisdictions, constitute a criminal offence. Particular care was taken to ensure that no forms of consensual sexual activity were captured.

4. Devries, Karen, et al. (2018). Who Perpetrates Violence Against Children? A systematic analysis of age-specific and sex-specific data, *BMJ Paediatrics Open*.

5. World Health Organization. (2022). What Works to Prevent Online Violence Against Children?, WHO, Geneva, 2022.

Funded by End Violence Against Children

Table 1: Most commonly reported perpetrators, by country

Country	Most commonly reported perpetrators[6]
Cambodia	Family member (53%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (27%) Person unknown to the child (26%)
Ethiopia	Family member (35%) Romantic partner or ex-partner (32%) Person unknown to the child (32%)
Indonesia	Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (48%) Person unknown to the child (38%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (29%)
Kenya	Person unknown to the child (43%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (30%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (30%)
Malaysia	Person unknown to the child (63%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (16%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (13%)
Mozambique	Person unknown to the child (34%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (29%) Family member (28%)
Namibia	Romantic partner or ex-partner (37%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (34%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (33%)
The Philippines	Person unknown to the child (60%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (16%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (13%)
Tanzania	Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (38%) Romantic partner or ex-partner (35%) Family member (32%)
Thailand	Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18 (64%) Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (59%) Romantic partner or ex-partner (23%)
Uganda	Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18 (36%) Person unknown to the child (32%) Romantic partner or ex-partner (29%)

6. Respondents could select multiple answers to this question, as multiple perpetrators may have been involved. Therefore the figures for each country may add up to more than 100%.

Funded by End Violence Against Children

DISRUPTING HARM

Friend or someone the child knew, aged over 18

Friends or someone the child knew aged over 18 were, on average, the most common perpetrators cited by respondents across the 11 countries analysed. This was highest in Thailand (selected by 59% of children), where friends or others the child knew (older and younger) make up a majority of perpetrators, followed by Indonesia (48%). However, friends or acquaintances aged over 18 were among the least common perpetrators in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Friend or someone the child knew, aged under 18

Friends or someone the child knew aged under 18 were the second most common category selected by children. They were most frequently reported in Thailand (64%), followed by Namibia (34%), but one of the least common perpetrators in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Family members

Family members were the most common perpetrators according to respondents in Cambodia (53%), followed by Ethiopia (35%), Tanzania (32%) and Mozambique (28%). This category was rarely reported in other countries in South-East Asia.

Romantic partners and ex-partners

Online sexual exploitation and abuse by romantic partners and ex-partners was most common in Namibia (37%), followed by Tanzania (35%) and Ethiopia (32%). In general, more respondents in Eastern and Southern Africa (except for Mozambique) mentioned current or former romantic partners as perpetrators, compared to respondents in Southeast Asia.

People unknown to the child

In Malaysia (63%), the Philippines (60%) and Kenya (43%), many children reported that the perpetrator was someone unknown to them. In Malaysia and the Philippines this was the most frequently reported perpetrator category overall.

Prefer not to say

Many children who took part in the survey did not want to answer the question around their relationship to the perpetrator. Between 8% and 18% of children in Eastern and Southern Africa who had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse did not provide this information. The figure for Southeast Asia was between 23% and 29%, with the highest percentages in Indonesia (29%) and Malaysia (29%). While children were not asked why they did not want to answer these questions, there might be a stronger preference to guard this information when the perpetrator is someone close to the child. Younger children aged 12–13 were less likely to answer these questions with no difference between boys and girls.

Funded by End Violence Against Children

DISRUPTING HARM

Recommended actions

1. **Design national prevention and education programmes and responses using a tailored, data-driven approach.** Significant variation exists between countries with respect to who are the most common perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Prevention messaging and educational approaches, as well as responses, will be more effective if informed by national data. Different perpetrators require different types of prevention and responses. In the absence of national data, prevention and response efforts need to consider all potential perpetrators.
2. **Provide age-appropriate and culturally relevant comprehensive sexuality education that is aligned with the international technical guidance[7] on sexuality education and centred on empowerment, critical thinking and the promotion of gender-equitable norms and power relations.** This can encourage open dialogue about healthy relationships, both online and in person, and help children recognise the warning signs of predatory or harmful behaviours
3. **Equip caregivers, community leaders, educators and other professionals with up-to-date information and support on the prevention of child sexual abuse.** This should dispel common misconceptions about sexual abuse, including about the perpetrators of abuse. Perpetrators take advantage of people's lack of knowledge about how they offend in order to abuse children. Adults should understand that children often stay silent about abuse, and should look for signs of abuse rather than wait for children to speak up.
4. **Ensure the availability of trained professionals and services to respond to child sexual abuse.** In some countries, family members were reported to be the most common perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Cases of sexual abuse where the perpetrator is a family member can be particularly complicated due to unequal power dynamics, risks to children's safety and/or failure to recognise the abuse. Multi-sectoral services need to be equipped to provide suitable support to children and their families.
5. **Ensure accountability and child-friendly and gender-sensitive access to justice.** Accountability and child-friendly and gender-sensitive access to justice should be prioritised for all children who are at risk of or experience online sexual exploitation and abuse. All children who come into contact with the law as alleged offenders should be supported and handled within a separate child justice system in accordance with child-friendly justice principles and procedures.

7. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, & World Health Organization. (2018). International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education: An evidence-informed approach. UNESCO, Paris.

Suggested citation:
UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (2023). ***Who perpetrates online child sexual exploitation and abuse?*** *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 8*, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

Copyright © End Violence Partnership and UNICEF, 2023. Use of this publication is permitted provided that the source is acknowledged and the publication is not used for commercial purposes.

Funding from the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, through its Safe Online initiative does not constitute endorsement.

Funded by End Violence Against Children