DATA INSIGHT NO 18

# PERPETRATORS OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



DISRUPTING HARM

Funded by Safe Online

Implemented by ECPAT INTERPOL unicef for every child

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are often understood through simple archetypes: the anonymous stranger online, an unknown adult hiding behind a screen, someone entirely separate from a child's everyday life. However, children and young people's experiences point to a more complex reality. Perpetrators can be strangers, but they are also frequently peers, intimate partners, classmates, acquaintances, family members or other individuals already part of children's lives.

Existing narratives often fail to capture that peers, romantic partners and other individuals known to the child can also be perpetrators. Research remains limited in many contexts, and few studies centre children and young people's own perspectives on how trust, familiarity, manipulation, coercion and fear shape interactions with perpetrators.

The data collected through the Disrupting Harm project contribute to a growing body of evidence showing that technology does not create entirely new or separate forms of sexual abuse. Rather tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse often manifests within existing social structures, norms and relational and power dynamics, and extends or enables existing situations of abuse. Children and young people's accounts illustrate how perpetrators may exploit emotional connection, social expectations, shame or fear of exposure to gain and maintain control. Their experiences challenge simplified understandings of risk and highlight that, while harm can emerge through digital interactions, it can equally emerge within familiar relationships and everyday physical environments.

## DEFINING TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term "tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse" to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as "online" child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term "tech-facilitated" is now preferred to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

While the interviews allowed participants to speak about any form of sexual violence perpetrated using digital technologies, the Disrupting Harm survey measured nine different indicators related to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of all the ways that digital technologies can facilitate sexual violence against children, it offers data on a range of abusive behaviours, from exposure to sexual content to sexual extortion and image-based abuse:

**Table 1.** Survey questions used to measure tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

| DISRUPTING HARM 2020-2021 | | DISRUPTING HARM 2024-2025 |
|---|---|---|
| Someone sent me sexual images I did not want | | Someone sent me sexual images or videos I did not want |
| I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to | | I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to |
| I have been asked for a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to | | I have been asked to share a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to |
| Someone shared sexual images of me without my consent | | Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission |
| Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself | | Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself |
| Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual | | Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual |
| Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities | | Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities |
| - | | Someone used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of me |
| - | | Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me |

# METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The data presented in this brief come from the primary data collection undertaken for Disrupting Harm during two research cycles, the first from 2020 to 2021 in 13 countries and the second from 2024 to 2025 in another 10 countries.[1] Nationally representative household surveys were also conducted, and data from around 21,000 12–17-year-old internet-using children and their caregivers across 21 countries are also presented here.[2] More details on the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

The survey data collected in the first round of studies were based on a seven-variable construct of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as listed in Table 1. In the second round of studies, this construct was expanded to include two additional variables, reflecting the evolving understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the need to capture additional forms of abuse not measured in the first round of research. As understanding of children's experiences in digital environments has developed, the updated framework incorporates a broader range of harmful behaviours and abusive dynamics, resulting in a more comprehensive measure of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. While findings from the first and second round are not directly comparable, the purpose of this brief is not to compare country-level estimates, but to analyse patterns in perpetration of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse across 21 countries.

Understanding of who perpetrates tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse has also evolved. As evidence has increasingly shown that harm can be perpetrated by both adults and other children, often within existing social relationships, harmonized perpetrator constructs were developed to facilitate comparison across both rounds of the Disrupting Harm survey data. These constructs group perpetrators into three overarching categories: strangers, someone the child knows and unidentified perpetrators.

**Table 2:** Perpetrator categories across both rounds of surveys

| DISRUPTING HARM 2020-2021 | DISRUPTING HARM 2024-2025 |
|---|---|
| **Strangers**<br>• Someone I didn't know before this happened. | **Strangers**<br>• Someone I didn't know before this happened. |
| **Someone the child knows**<br>• Someone in my family.<br>• A romantic partner (or ex).<br>• A friend or someone else I knew who is 18 years or older.<br>• A friend or someone else I knew who is younger than 18 years old. | **Someone the child knows**<br>• Someone in my family who was 18 years or older.<br>• Someone in my family who was younger than 18.<br>• A girlfriend, boyfriend or someone I had a crush on who was 18 years or older.<br>• A girlfriend, boyfriend or someone I had a crush on who was younger than 18.<br>• A friend or someone else I knew who was 18 years or older.<br>• A friend or someone else I knew who was younger than 18 years. |
| **Unidentified**<br>• I don't know who the person was.<br>• Prefer not to say. | **Unidentified**<br>• I don't know who the person was.<br>• Prefer not to say. |

This approach accounts for differences in perpetrator-identification response options between the first and second round of surveys, including the expansion and further disaggregation of perpetrator categories in the second round of research. The analysis further examined perpetrators by age and by their relationship to the child, but did not disaggregate perpetrators by gender or other characteristics.

1 Data for Tunisia and Morocco are not included in this brief as they were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

2 Out of the 25 countries where the Disrupting Harm research was conducted, data from four countries – South Africa, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco – have not been included in the survey data analysis presented here. In South Africa, a different approach was used for the sample, and some changes were made to the survey questions. In Jordan, all questions related to sex and sexual violence were removed from the survey, while Tunisia and Morocco are not included as data were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

# WHAT DO WE NOW KNOW ABOUT PERPETRATORS OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE?

In most countries, perpetrators were more commonly people children already knew, and in no country were strangers the most commonly reported perpetrator category.

These findings reinforce growing evidence that children's online and in-person worlds are deeply interconnected rather than separate. Tech-facilitated abuse often emerges through existing relationships and social dynamics, while digital platforms can also enable abuse to move between online and in-person spaces over time.

At the same time, patterns varied considerably across countries. In several countries, a substantial proportion of children reported that the perpetrator was unidentified. This category may reflect a range of circumstances, including situations where children had limited information about the perpetrator, where the nature of the relationship was unclear or where children did not disclose further details. As a result, unidentified perpetrators should not necessarily be interpreted as instances of anonymity alone, but rather as cases where the perpetrator could not be classified based on the available information. These differences underscore the need for prevention and response strategies that are tailored to children's diverse experiences across contexts (see Table 2).

**Table 3:** Perpetrator category by country (as a percentage of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse)

| | | Someone the child knows (%) | Stranger (%) | Unidentified (%) | Number of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases analysed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2020–2021 | Cambodia | 66% | 10% | 24% | 466 |
| | Ethiopia | 65% | 12% | 23% | 498 |
| | Indonesia | 54% | 15% | 32% | 116 |
| | Kenya | 66% | 17% | 18% | 574 |
| | Malaysia | 30% | 16% | 54% | 189 |
| | Mozambique | 58% | 21% | 21% | 636 |
| | Namibia | 62% | 15% | 23% | 461 |
| | Philippines | 35% | 19% | 46% | 823 |
| | Thailand | 73% | 8% | 20% | 537 |
| | Uganda | 67% | 16% | 17% | 751 |
| | Tanzania | 70% | 13% | 16% | 153 |
| | Viet Nam | 37% | 12% | 52% | 73 |
| 2024–2025 | Armenia | 56% | 22% | 22% | 83 |
| | Brazil | 56% | 19% | 25% | 379 |
| | Colombia | 45% | 21% | 34% | 457 |
| | Dominican Republic | 55% | 10% | 35% | 214 |
| | Mexico | 59% | 13% | 28% | 149 |
| | Montenegro | 66% | 17% | 17% | 367 |
| | North Macedonia | 78% | 5% | 16% | 427 |
| | Pakistan | 53% | 15% | 32% | 232 |
| | Serbia | 52% | 23% | 25% | 77 |
| | **21-country average** | **57%** | **15%** | **28%** | |

## Someone the child knows

Someone the child knew – including friends, family members and current or former romantic partners/crushes over and under the age of 18 – was the most commonly reported perpetrator category across the 21 countries analysed, accounting for more than half of reported cases on average (57 per cent). This category also accounted for more than half of reported perpetrators in most countries and was particularly high in North Macedonia (78 per cent), Thailand (73 per cent), and the United Republic of Tanzania (70 per cent). High proportions were also reported in Uganda (67 per cent), Montenegro (66 per cent), Cambodia (66 per cent) and Kenya (66 per cent). In contrast, lower proportions were observed in Malaysia (30 per cent) and the Philippines (35 per cent), where unidentified perpetrators accounted for a larger share of reported abuse.

The prominence of known perpetrators highlights that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is frequently rooted in children's existing social relationships rather than isolated online encounters. Familiarity and trust can create opportunities for sexual exploitation and abuse that are harder for children to recognize or disclose. In intimate relationships, for example, grooming can involve building an emotional connection that makes controlling or exploitative behaviour difficult to distinguish from the relationship itself. Digital tools can then be used to maintain contact, apply pressure or exploit information and images shared within the relationship.

Sexual exploitation and abuse between peers can present additional challenges. Harmful sexual behaviour may initially be dismissed as joking, teasing, flirting or a misunderstanding, particularly where children are navigating social norms around gender, relationships and sexuality. This can make it more difficult to recognize when a boundary has been crossed or when behaviour has become harmful. Harmful gender norms evident across all countries also shape and influence these dynamics, including expectations around masculinity, status and sexual behaviour that may encourage the sharing or use of intimate content without a child's permission.

These dynamics reinforce the importance of prevention that goes beyond warning children about strangers. The findings suggest that continuous, open and age-appropriate support discussions and education around consent, healthy boundaries and respectful relationships are needed. This kind of open discussion can support children in recognizing when behaviour becomes coercive, controlling or exploitative, even when it comes from someone they know, like or trust. This can be particularly difficult when the person causing harm is someone the child depends on, cares about or fears losing, making it harder to recognize the behaviour as harmful, resist pressure or seek help. Adults and services therefore need to be equipped to respond sensitively to abuse within peer, family and intimate relationships, while ensuring that children are supported and not blamed for what has happened.

The findings also reinforce that online and in-person relationships cannot always be treated separately. Someone known to a child in person may use digital platforms to exploit or abuse a child, while someone first encountered online may become familiar to the child over time. Prevention and response therefore need to account for the ways technology can facilitate abuse across different types of relationships and settings.

## Strangers

Strangers in this study are defined as someone the child did not know before the incident happened. Although strangers were identified as perpetrators in every country, they accounted for a smaller proportion of cases than perpetrators known to the child. Across the 21 countries analysed, strangers were responsible for every 15 out of 100 cases on average, with the highest proportions observed in Serbia (23 per cent) and Armenia (22 per cent). In contrast, strangers accounted for a relatively small share of cases in North Macedonia (5 per cent), Thailand (8 per cent), and Cambodia and the Dominican Republic (10 per cent each).

These findings suggest that, while protecting children from contact with unknown individuals online remains important, approaches to child online safety that focus primarily on "stranger danger" do not reflect the full reality of how children are sexually exploited and abused using digital technologies. Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can involve individuals children have never previously met, but the larger share of cases involving people children already know indicates that abuse often takes place within relationships or social networks that children may already consider familiar or trusted. This can make it particularly important that children are supported to recognize behaviours that cross boundaries and become coercive or exploitative and that they are adequately supported when they seek help, rather than being taught only to avoid contact with strangers.

While strangers represent a smaller share of reported perpetrators, they remain an important part of the prevention picture. Children should be supported to navigate contact with people they do not know online, including recognizing manipulation, pressure and attempts to move conversations or interactions into more private spaces. At the same time, these findings suggest that online safety messages should sit within a broader approach that helps children recognize and respond to harmful behaviour across all types of relationships, including those with people they already know and trust.

### Unidentified

Unidentified perpetrators – referring to responses where children selected "don't know" or "prefer not to say" when asked to identify the perpetrator(s) – also accounted for a substantial proportion of reported perpetrators across several countries. This category was highest in Malaysia (54 per cent), followed by Viet Nam (52 per cent) and the Philippines (46 per cent). In these contexts, unidentified perpetrators were reported more frequently than both strangers and people known to the child. This may reflect the anonymity of some online interactions, limited information available about perpetrators or uncertainty and discomfort in identifying or categorizing the relationship.

The relatively large share of unidentified perpetrators is important when interpreting the overall patterns around perpetrator profiles. In some cases, children may have limited information about someone they encountered online, particularly where interactions involve anonymous or false accounts. In other cases, children may be uncertain or uncomfortable about responding to this question or about how to categorize their relationship with the person responsible. This means that the distinction between "stranger" and "someone known" does not capture every way in which perpetrators may gain access to children or develop relationships with them.

# CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings show that perpetrator dynamics are more complex than a simple distinction between strangers and people children know.



**Across different relationships, perpetrators can exploit a combination of familiarity, trust, social norms and digital tools to initiate or sustain harmful and abusive behaviours.**

This points to the need for prevention and response strategies that address the relational and social context in which sexual exploitation and abuse occurs, not just the identity of the perpetrator.

**Helping children understand consent, boundaries and healthy relationships, while ensuring they have trusted and accessible avenues for support, is important whether the person responsible is a stranger, peer, romantic partner, family member or someone else the child knows.**

## ABOUT THE *DATA INSIGHTS* SERIES FROM DISRUPTING HARM

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online since 2019. The project and its research methodology is designed and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti). This research generates national evidence on tech-facilitated 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. Evidence about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was collected in 13 countries between 2020 and 2021: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam).

In 2024 and 2025, data was collected in an additional 12 countries: Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Serbia and Tunisia.

Since 2019, the Disrupting Harm project, together with national partners and researchers, have conducted surveys and interviews with more than 25,000 children and young people, including those who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, over 25,000 caregivers were surveyed, and 540 professionals with child protection mandates interviewed. More detailed information about the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti since 2019 are used as the basis for the Disrupting Harm Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organization(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 organizations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

**Suggested citation:**

UNICEF, 'Perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse', Disrupting Harm Data Insight no. 18. Safe Online, New York, 2026.

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Funding from Safe Online does not constitute endorsement.

**Acknowledgements:**

This data insight was written by Anisha Bhargava and Marium Saeed, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti. The data analysis that informed this data insight was prepared by Anisha Bhargava and Hélène Guillou. We acknowledge the contributions of UNICEF colleagues working on the Disrupting Harm project, our implementing partners at ECPAT International, INTERPOL and Safe Online, and all national partners who made this initiative possible. Full acknowledgements for the Disrupting Harm project can be found here.