DATA INSIGHT NO 20

LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY IN ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE CASES



DISRUPTING HARM

Funded by Safe Online

Implemented by INTERPOL



The data gathered under Disrupting Harm present **an opportunity to assist national law enforcement to identify and handle cases** of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.



The creation of **a dedicated specialized unit to investigate tech-facilitated child sexual** exploitation and abuse cases is critical for an effective law enforcement response. Serving as a focal point for resources, training and capacity-building, as well as operational communication on this type of crime, such units are embedded in INTERPOL's global network as the point of contact for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases from the international community.



Officer well-being is an integral part of ensuring that specialized units have the care and mental health tools they need to continue investigating tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases effectively.

DEFINING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term "technology-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 "technology-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.

INTERPOL methodology in the second round of Disrupting Harm studies

The law enforcement component of the second round of Disrupting Harm studies was led by INTERPOL. INTERPOL's Crimes Against Children Unit conducted field-based assessments in collaboration with each member country's National Central Bureau. The INTERPOL team engaged directly with national law enforcement agencies and their child protection units as well as with trusted civil society partners and non-governmental organizations. The aim was to understand the operational realities of investigating and responding to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. These engagements focused on identifying practical challenges: gaps in resources, limitations in investigative capacity and barriers to international cooperation.

The Disrupting Harm national reports, which are publicly available, include INTERPOL's aggregated, non-sensitive findings. However, the full scope of its observations and conclusions (including detailed operational recommendations and tailored capacity-building measures) are shared exclusively with national authorities in a confidential report, ensuring the integrity of ongoing investigations. The findings also inform the targeted support INTERPOL provides to its member countries, which could include access to specialized training, analytical tools and coordinated operational assistance.

As many of the findings regarding law enforcement capacity are limited to the confidential reports, this document aims to provide an overview of how the INTERPOL team assesses law enforcement capacity across countries, as well as providing universal recommendations that are relevant for every country.

INTERPRETING LAW ENFORCEMENT DATA

Law enforcement effectiveness is often measured by the number of cases that lead to charges or prosecutions, so these figures are commonly used as key indicators. In some countries, these are also the only reliable data available, due to limited record-keeping systems and infrastructure constraints. Where legislation does not fully capture all aspects of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, the data reported by law enforcement are further limited to only those offences that are explicitly defined in law. So, when legislation does not include all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, the data are classified under broader crimes, for example, trafficking, which then hinders understanding of the full scope of the issue. These challenges are further explored in the Disrupting Harm Data Insight on Legislation.

The available data on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases are therefore incomplete and uneven across countries, because they depend on both legal definitions and the quality of data systems – thus not necessarily reflecting the true scale of the problem or the full scope of law enforcement activity. Nevertheless, a review of law enforcement communications, stakeholder interviews and data from Disrupting Harm research shows that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is present in all participating countries.

Key capacity indicators

Even with data limitations, the findings still point to key features of how countries are responding. When assessing law enforcement capacity, INTERPOL looks at whether there is a dedicated unit for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases (rather than relying on general cybercrime or broader violence units), whether reports such as the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's (NCMEC) CyberTips are received and triaged effectively, and whether countries contribute to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database. Other indicators include the extent to which proactive victim identification is prioritized – especially for material likely involving children within the country – and how foreign law enforcement agencies experience cooperation when pursuing cases linked to that jurisdiction. In looking at these elements, as opposed to the limited data regarding charges and prosecutions, it becomes possible to shift the focus towards practical solutions, particularly around operational support and capacity-building.

Interestingly, Disrupting Harm research has found that the capabilities listed above often cluster together. Countries that have a system for triaging NCMEC reports, for example, also tend to have a specialized unit and to be active ICSE users, suggesting a virtuous circle in which strengthening one aspect of the response is associated with broader institutional capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY

The following are general recommendations for improving law enforcement capacity, based on overall findings across countries.



Dedicated specialized units

While the definition of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse for the purposes of Disrupting Harm is rightly broad and inclusive of a wide range of activities, it may not always be helpful for law enforcement with limited charging or prosecutorial options. Questions of how to improve the recording and tracking of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases within law enforcement processes should be reframed into operational efforts to assist law enforcement to handle such cases. Allocating the required funding to the creation of dedicated, specialized units in countries that currently lack them would be a

crucial first step towards effective tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse investigations. It is worth noting that sustained resources are also needed to maintain these units over time, including funding for continued capacity building efforts, licensing costs for specialized tools and targeted strategies to retain officers.

The creation of a dedicated specialized unit – or dedicated specialized officers within a unit – to investigate tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases is critical, serving as a focal point for resources, training and capacity-building, as well as operational communication on this type of crime. Once connected to INTERPOL's global network, this unit would function as the national point of contact for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases from the international community.

The specialized unit should be composed of officers with experience in investigating tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, strong computer and cyber skills, knowledge of trauma-informed practices and a willingness to coordinate with child protection and social services. Depending on the country's organizational structure and operational context, the unit should have access to key capabilities that support effective investigations and child-centred responses. These may include public-facing reporting mechanisms, such as a reporting desk or hotline, child-friendly spaces, high-speed internet connectivity, digital forensic capacity and appropriate technical tools. Such capabilities may be provided directly by the specialized unit or through established institutional arrangements with other relevant units or agencies.



Officer well-being and psychosocial support

Officers investigating tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases are routinely exposed to highly distressing child sexual abuse material, yet often lack adequate mental health support. This creates serious risks to both individual well-being and operational effectiveness. Studies show that these investigators experience significantly high levels of psychological distress.[1] Research also indicates that organizational culture strongly influences whether officers seek psychological support. Among police personnel investigating child sexual abuse and exploitation in the United Kingdom, perceived stigma, lack of trust and a judgmental workplace culture were major barriers to using available well-being services.[2] Without embedded welfare support, officers are more vulnerable to burnout and secondary trauma – issues that can lead to high turnover, staff shortages and increasing caseloads as online risks to children continue to grow.

To mitigate these risks, agencies should integrate staff welfare into standard operating procedures and prioritize retention of trained specialists. Mandatory mental health support for front-line personnel is essential, alongside workplace practices that allow time to process the emotional impact of the work, such as peer-support networks where officers can discuss challenges in a safe and caring environment, and supportive leadership practices. Law enforcement agencies should also normalize help-seeking and provide access to specialist psychological services. These measures are critical to sustaining both officer well-being and the long-term effectiveness of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse investigations.



Working with limited legislation

The effective use of existing legislation is key to securing convictions. Much of law enforcement's work is driven and measured by securing convictions, and the possibility of taking effective action hinges on the ability to apply existing legislation to particular circumstances. Although the adoption of updated and comprehensive legislation on cyber-related crimes and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse specifically is highly recommended, the absence of such legislation does not prevent law enforcement from taking action. At their core, many tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases represent – even depict – very serious child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, and, in most cases, existing legislation can be applied. That said, inadequate legislation will never fully capture the dynamics of the crime and the harm done.

1 Gewirtz-Meydan, Ateret, Kimberly J. Mitchell and Jennifer E. O'Brien, 'Trauma behind the keyboard: Exploring disparities in child sexual abuse materials exposure and mental health factors among investigators and forensic examiners – A network analysis', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 152, June 2024, 106757.

2 Redmond, Theresa, et al., 'How we can protect the protectors: Learning from police officers and staff involved in child sexual abuse and exploitation investigations' *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 14, 10 May 2023.

MOVING FORWARD

It is evident that many of the challenges highlighted by INTERPOL's data collection under Disrupting Harm are universal, but with important differences both in children's experiences, and in each country's capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively. This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts such as Disrupting Harm to determine the extent to which children are subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and to inform how prevention and response capabilities can be improved. A focused and dedicated approach to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse will lead to measurable results. As law enforcement agencies improve their operational handling of such cases, the successes can be recorded and built on to inform future activities and research.

ABOUT THE *DATA INSIGHTS* SERIES FROM DISRUPTING HARM

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online. 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.

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