



DISRUPTING HARM

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DATA INSIGHT 10



LAW ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY IN ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE CASES



INTERPOL

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

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

- The data gathered under *Disrupting Harm* presents an opportunity to assist national law enforcement to identify and handle cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA).
- The creation of a dedicated specialised unit to investigate OCSEA 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 get embedded in INTERPOL's global network as the point of contact for OCSEA cases from the international community.

INTERPOL Methodology in *Disrupting Harm*

For reference, please consider the [INTERPOL research methodology](#) used in the *Disrupting Harm* project.

Quantitative Case Data Analysis

Data was sought on cases related to OCSEA from law enforcement authorities via the INTERPOL National Central Bureau (NCB) in each country. Data was also obtained from the mandated reports of U.S. based technology companies to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and from a number of other partner organisations with a view to deepening the understanding of relevant offences committed in the country, offender and victim behaviour, crime enablers and vulnerabilities. Crime data was analysed for the three years from 2017 to 2019.

Qualitative Capacity Assessments

In addition to seeking data on OCSEA cases, INTERPOL requested data on the capacity of the national law enforcement authorities to respond to this type of crime and interviewed serving officers. Particular emphasis was placed on human resources, access to specialist equipment and training, investigative procedures, the use of tools for international cooperation, achievements and challenges. Data for investigation and criminal justice outcomes was also requested for the years 2017, 2018 and 2019..

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.

As the *Disrupting Harm* research team began the processes of collecting and analysing law enforcement data on crimes relating to OCSEA, a number of issues and questions emerged regarding the quality of recorded data, and its interpretation. This document provides a context in which to interpret and reflect on the law enforcement data from 13 countries, improve understanding of such data, and provides recommendations towards raising law enforcement capacity towards OCSEA in the future.

Interpreting Law Enforcement Data

Limited OCSEA Data

Since law enforcement effectiveness is frequently measured by successfully prosecuted cases, statistics indicating the number of persons charged with offences may be a primary indicator. For some countries these were the only practically available indicator considering record keeping practices and infrastructure limitations. Where there were known legislative shortcomings in describing some aspects of OCSEA, the data returned by law enforcement was often limited to child sexual exploitation and abuse offences.

Key Capacity Indicators and Next Steps

From reviewing law enforcement's operational communications, anecdotal evidence, and data from other components in the *Disrupting Harm* research, it is clear that OCSEA exists in all participating countries, and local law enforcement should identify and handle these cases through proactive and operational support.

Despite these limitations, the data collected for *Disrupting Harm* might nevertheless indicate key characteristics of the respective countries' law enforcement response:

1. Is there a dedicated and **specialised unit specifically for OCSEA cases** (in contrast to a general cybercrime unit, or a gender-based violence unit with some awareness training)?
2. Are **NCMEC CyberTips or other sources of reports (such as from internet hotlines) received directly** by the specialised unit and triaged?
3. Are contributions made by the country to **INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database**?
4. Are **proactive victim identification efforts** prioritised for child sexual abuse materials that are believed to depict children from within their jurisdiction or country?
5. What is the **experience of foreign law enforcement agencies** when investigating OCSEA cases or leads in this country?

The answers to these questions for many *Disrupting Harm* target countries are often immediately clear. The *Disrupting Harm* findings should serve as a basis to transition the discussion to solutions regarding operational assistance and capacity building of a practical nature. In this sense, the exact numbers of OCSEA cases identified or reported is less important and may not be as important as developing a detailed proposal for a country's response.

INTERPOL and UNICEF have recently identified opportunities for operational assistance and capacity building for law enforcement in Ethiopia, especially around handling incidents of online child sexual exploitation reported by industry, and supporting the creation of a national internet hotline reporting mechanism. These discussions stem out of the *Disrupting Harm* project, and are a positive step towards strengthening Ethiopia's response to online child sexual exploitation.

Recommendations for Improving Law Enforcement Capacity

Dedicated Specialised Units

While the definition of OCSEA for the purposes of *Disrupting Harm* is correctly broad and inclusive of a wide range of activities, this broad definition may not always be helpful for law enforcement with limited charging or prosecutorial options. Questions of how to improve the recording and tracking of OCSEA cases within law enforcement processes should be reframed into operational efforts to assist law enforcement to handle OCSEA cases. Allocating the required funding to the creation of dedicated, specialised units in countries which currently lack them would be a crucial first step towards effective OCSEA investigations.

The creation of a dedicated specialised unit, or dedicated specialised officers within a unit, to investigate OCSEA 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 OCSEA cases from the international community.

The specialised unit should be composed of officers with experience in sexual exploitation and abuse of children and with strong computer and cyber skills. The specialised unit should include a public-facing reporting desk, child-friendly spaces, high-speed and stable internet connectivity, with digital forensic capacity and technical tools on-site.

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 their ability to take effective action hinges on their ability to apply existing legislation to particular circumstances. **Although the adoption of updated and comprehensive legislation on cyber-related crimes and OCSEA specifically is highly recommended, the absence of such legislation does not prevent law enforcement from taking action. At their core, many OCSEA cases represent – even depict – very serious child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, and existing legislation can be applied.**

A focused and dedicated approach to OCSEA will lead to measurable results. As operational success is achieved, it can be recorded and built on to inform future activities and research.

It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of *Disrupting Harm* national assessments across 13 countries in two regions are present in other parts of the world, 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** like *Disrupting Harm* to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and to inform how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

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