



PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THE PHILIPPINES FROM ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: THE WAY FORWARD

Internet use in the Philippines is prolific, with 95% of 12-17-year-olds in the Philippines being internet users. Every day, children in the Philippines face the risk and reality of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA). According to data from *Disrupting Harm's* nationally-representative household survey of 12-17-year-old internet users, 20% said that in the past year they were subjected to at least one of the following: offered money or gifts in return for sharing sexual images; offered money or gifts to engage in sexual acts in person; having their sexual images shared without permission; being threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities. A range of legislation is in place in the Philippines to prevent and punish OCSEA and to protect victims. There is also substantial internal and international cooperation on the issue. Yet despite these promising practices – including child-friendly procedures designed to prevent further traumatising of child victims of sexual abuse – there are gaps in systematically implementing these procedures across the Philippines that require urgent attention.

Recommendations

Combating OCSEA and strengthening victim support requires comprehensive and sustained actions from a diverse array of stakeholders: policy-makers, law enforcement agencies, justice and social support service professionals, domestic Internet service providers, communities, teachers and caregivers. *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* lays out an actionable blueprint to protect children, through a series of evidence-based recommendations spanning legislation, law enforcement, legal processes, social services, and public awareness. These recommendations call on the Government of the Philippines and its partners to act, educate, and invest in addressing OCSEA.

Act

- Streamline the mandates and responsibilities of all agencies working on OCSEA, to ensure efficient use of resources and avoid duplication of efforts.
- Increase coordination across programmes focused on online versus offline violence and, to the extent that it makes sense, across programmes focusing on violence against women and children.
- Explicitly criminalise live streaming of child sexual abuse and sexual extortion of children. In addition, adopt new legal provisions to criminalise online sexual harassment.
- Amend the legislation on child sexual abuse material (CSAM) to explicitly cover depictions of a child's body for sexual purposes and bring it fully into line with the standards set by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
- Avoid unnecessary removal of child victims from their families and communities. If a child is to be removed from her/his home or community, an assessment should be made to determine if this is in the best interest of the child. If shelter services are to be utilised, it should be for the shortest possible time and conditions should conform to international standards.

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- Provide children and their caregivers with clear and child-friendly information about the court process, including timeframe and expectations for a decision to be made for their case. In addition, children and caregivers should be informed about available psychosocial support and their right to compensation.
- Strengthen police capacity and response by building and maintaining a critical mass of appropriately trained staff to undertake investigations and resolve cases. Train officers at all levels and in all regions on how to handle OCSEA cases and increase capacity for processing NCMEC reports and responding to green notifications.
- Emphasise ongoing efforts to connect relevant specialised unit to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database to facilitate international cooperation and eliminate duplication of efforts. The ICSE database is an intelligence and investigative tool that allows specialised investigators to share data on cases of child sexual abuse.
- Increase law enforcement capacity to engage in proactive investigations and to reduce reliance on external referrals by building their investigative capacity and skills.
- Monitor the compliance of Internet service providers with the provisions of the Anti-Child Pornography Act – to report CSAM within seven days and to remove any form of CSAM within 48 hours of receiving notice of the existence of such material on their servers.
- Engage with owners and proprietors of internet cafes, Pisonets, and other computer rental shops to ensure adequate safeguards are in place to protect children from harmful content or interactions online by installing pop-up blockers and limiting access to sites that are not age-appropriate for children.

Educate

- Regularly train professionals and workers in contact with children, equipping them to identify at-risk children or those who may have experienced OCSEA and how to respond adequately when children are brave enough to seek help.
- Continue to increase awareness of violence against children – including OCSEA – among adults and children through evidence-based campaigns.

These should be developed and tested through safe and ethical consultations with children, caregivers and teachers. These programmes should be regularly monitored, evaluated, and modified if needed to ensure that they are effective in protecting children.

- Extend existing educational initiatives on OCSEA for children. These programmes should inform children about their right to be protected from all forms of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. They should also include age- and development-appropriate information about various topics that addresses, among other issues, sexual reproductive health and rights, consent, personal boundaries, risks and responsibilities when sending and receiving sexual images, as well as where to seek support when needed.
- Provide digital literacy programmes for children and caregivers, including information about how to respond to online harms, what content is appropriate to share with others online, and basic skills such as how to change privacy settings, block other users, or report harmful incidents online.
- Ensure that the above programmes have universal reach including rural populations, younger children, disadvantaged groups of children and older caregivers who use the internet less frequently.

Invest

- Allocate resources to prevent and respond to OCSEA. Ensure sufficient funding for overall policy-making and coordination, public information and the education and empowerment of children. Make budgets available to support technical training on OCSEA for police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, child protection officers, medical staff, frontline social workers, and teachers, to ensure they are regularly up to date on the rapidly evolving patterns of offending.
- Dedicate more resources to child helplines to improve their capacity to respond and provide support. Additional funding could also allow helplines to maintain a database of basic statistics related to OCSEA cases they receive, which would in turn inform the development national strategies to strengthen the child protection system.

- Fund the creation of a national child sex offender registry in line with the recommended activities of the Regional Plan of Action for the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Consider integrating this registry within appropriate law enforcement agencies – including immigration and border control units – with the aim to monitor and limit offenders’ contact with children.
- Leverage the fact that children rely on their interpersonal networks to disclose abuse by funding more community-level resources to facilitate disclosure and reporting of OCSEA. For example, programmes in which trained community members are skilled up and trained on how to handle disclosures can then assist children and their families with the reporting and help-seeking process.

Key insights

Disrupting Harm in the Philippines highlights the following six key insights obtained from the research:

1. In the past year alone, 20% of internet users aged 12-17 in the Philippines were victims of grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes being blackmailed to engage in sexual activities, someone sharing their sexual images without permission, or being coerced to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts. Scaled to the population, this represents an estimated two million children who were subjected to any of these harms in just one year.
2. According to the household survey, OCSEA is most often committed by individuals unknown to the child – between 46% – 61% depending on the type of OCSEA in question. However, it can also be facilitated and committed by people the child already knows. These can be friends or acquaintances of the child (both peers and adults) but also romantic partners and family members.
3. Among children who experienced OCSEA on social media, Facebook or Facebook Messenger were the most common platforms where this occurred, accounting for over 90% of cases. Other platforms cited, to a much lesser degree, were TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.
4. Many children in the Philippines did not tell anyone the last time they were subjected to OCSEA. Very few turn to formal reporting mechanisms like helplines or the police. Children who disclose their abuse often rely on their friends for support.
5. A range of promising initiatives driven by both government and civil society are already underway in the Philippines, however challenges still exist. These challenges include varying levels of capacity among responders across the country, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of tools for operational activities including early detections, child friendly investigations and the resolution of cases.
6. While important OCSEA-related legislation, policies and standards are enacted in the Philippines, implementing these frameworks requires more attention, prioritisation and investment.

The full report and complete list of recommendations can be found [here](#).



DISRUPTING HARM

About Disrupting Harm

Disrupting Harm in the Philippines is part of an unprecedented, multi-country research project on OCSEA, focusing on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. This large-scale research project draws on the expertise of ECPAT, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, and their global networks of partners. *Disrupting Harm* is supported by the Fund to End Violence Against Children, through its Safe Online initiative. In the Philippines, research took place from early 2020 to early 2021, including interviews with high-level representatives from the Government of the Philippines and a range of public bodies and other organisations active in the country.

Research activities included a comprehensive analysis of the legislation, policy and systems addressing OCSEA in the Philippines, as well as interviews with justice actors and frontline service providers, and a nationally representative household survey with internet-using 12-17-year-old children and their caregivers. Data from these multiple sources were compared and triangulated to produce the *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* national report. Recommendations from the data were presented and discussed at a national consultation event in Manila in December 2021.

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